

Essay as Earnest Game

Natalie Bicknell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington, 2016

Committee: Maya Sonenberg and David Shields

Program Authorized to Offer Degree: Creative Writing

©Copyright 2016

Natalie Bicknell

Abstract for *Essay as Earnest Game* by Natalie Bicknell

Chair of the Supervisory Committee: Professor Maya Sonenberg

Department of English, Creative Writing

This critical thesis discusses the connection between increased reader engagement with content and “playful” alternative forms of the personal essay, focusing on a close reading of three structurally innovative personal essays: *The Pain Scale* by Eula Biss, *The Search for Marvin Gardens* by John McPhee, and *Outline Towards a Theory of the Mine Versus the Mind and the Harvard Outline* by Ander Monson. Each of these essays uses innovative form to simultaneously surprise, challenge, and delight readers.

I. Introduction

In her 2015 conference address to the Association of Writers and Publishers (AWP), Karen Russell writes in praise of literature that “reminds me that I do not have to take the Autobahn from birth to death, patting around the Cheetos curls for tollbooth quarters. There are rest stops, detours through woods, strange intersections. There are many alternate possible routes through this, our only life.”¹

Russell’s conference address, a hybrid of science reporting, memoir, literary, cultural, economic criticism, and meditation on writing craft reflects on the joy that can be found in the “many alternate routes.” As an essay, it took me off guard. I began reading it late one evening expecting to put it down after a couple paragraphs, but I couldn’t. I finished it before falling asleep that night and read it again in the morning too.

The address begins by championing how play can operate as a kind of immersion in alternate reality. When immersed in the pretend world of the game, people engage in the dual acts of “self forgetting” and “confrontation.”² Literature offers a similar kind of engagement with the real and unreal, and a similar opportunity for cognitive and emotional growth.

To this point, Russell writes:

In our ordinary lives and skins, it can be insanely threatening to move into an alien perspective, or to be inhabited by strong emotions. But books are **earnest games** where certain kinds of stakes get reduced so that we can risk this merger with the author’s imagination. In the “safe” world of a book, we can move dangerously, thinking and feeling beyond the boundaries set by our self-preserving instincts. Every book is a haunted house, made out of our raw materials and powered by our ghosts. Lost in a book,

¹ Karen Russell, “*The Paradoxical Usefulness of Nonutilitarian Motion, A.K.A ‘Play’*,” *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Volume 48, Number 3, p. 30

² Karen Russell, “*The Paradoxical Usefulness of Nonutilitarian Motion, A.K.A ‘Play’*,” *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Volume 48, Number 3, p. 32

I often find myself facing overwhelming truths that might otherwise flee, or that would be invisible to me from my perch in ordinary time.³

I find the concept of the earnest game to be important because it encapsulates what I believe to be the two most important qualities of literature:

1. The vital engagement literature provides with diversion, mental abstraction, reverie, and role acting, all activities that despite their critical role in human cognitive and emotional growth are often trivialized and marginalized by production oriented societies.

2. The ability of literature to use this engagement to impart significant content to a reader. Through the activities we undertake when we read literature we can explore the most profound questions of our human existences.

Although Russell is a fiction writer, she devotes a substantial amount of the address to the subject of the essay as playground for immersion in alternate reality, and thus an “earnest game” that allows the reader to “move dangerously” beyond the “boundaries set by our self-preserving instincts.”

Essays can make an excellent staging ground for this kind of “off road” experience is because the essay has, in the words of Lopate “the freedom to move anyway, in all directions. It acts as if all objects were equally near the center and as if ‘all subjects are linked to each other’ (Montaigne) by free association.”⁴ Of course the essay is not the only genre of writing that can open up such freedom of movement. In my perspective any type of writing, even very strictly formal writing such as traditional narrative fiction, or even more form driven still, “non-creative” writing types such as recipe, resume, or dictionary entry, can be “hacked” and subverted into dangerous new

³ Karen Russell, “*The Paradoxical Usefulness of Nonutilitarian Motion, A.K.A ‘Play’*,” *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Volume 48, Number 3, p. 32-33

⁴ Philip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, xxxvii

landscapes. Simple by virtue of being a “made thing” (the word fiction, coming from the Latin, *fingere*, meaning to shape, form, devise, feign⁵) all writing contains the possibility of being made into a mutant, especially writing that aims to go beyond the mere recording of information. As Margot Singer writes, “...even the most scrupulously fact-based, truthful writing is always an imaginative act, a work of art.”⁶ Eula Biss takes this statement even one step further. “ I suspect,” Biss writes, “that genre, like gender, with which it shares a root, is mostly a collection of lies we’ve agreed to believe.”⁷

But ideas of genre in writing do persist, probably because as human beings we have an innate cognitive tendency toward “grouping” or categorical thinking.⁸ Essays, however, have a history of challenging this tendency toward categorization. Recently I have discovered a subset of criticism on the essay that declares essay as a “queer genre” in the sense that just as queerness resists classic gender binaries and undermines these binaries by replacing them with indeterminate, transgressive desires, the essay, similarly, has a desire to transgress genre, with the most memorable essays being formally “labile” and actively stretching our sense of “what essays might be.”⁹ Of course there are many essays (notably this one) that conform to conventions in a traditional manner, so to define the essay as “queer” feels a bit convenient and overgeneralizing, but I do think that with consideration as to why there are so many essays that seem to aggressively push at boundaries or flout conventions it is important to

⁵ Online Etymology Dictionary, entry for “fiction”

⁶ Margot Singer, *On Convention*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 146

⁷ Eula Biss, *It Is What It Is*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 197

⁸ *Invisibilia*, National Public Radio, The Power of Categories

⁹ David Lazar, *Queering the Essay*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 16

remember that at its best, the essay does stretch our sense of possibility, and by doing so, opens up opportunities for exploration.

Russell's address focuses on a subset of the "informal essay"¹⁰ sometimes labeled as the "lyric essay," a form which D'Agata refers to as having origins that date all the way back to the list writer Ziusudra in ancient Sumeria, thus dating the form as nearly as old as writing itself. According to D'Agata¹¹:

... his [Ziusudra's] list is a beginning of an alternative to nonfiction, the beginning of a form that's not propelled by information, but one compelled instead by individual expression-- by inquiry, by opinion, by wonder, by doubt. Ziusudra's list is the first essay in the world: it's a mind's inquisitive ramble through a place wiped clean of answers. It is trying to make a new shape where there previously was none.

When one is compelled forward in writing by "individual expression-- by inquiry, by opinion, by wonder, by doubt," the path laid out by the writer is seldom a straight one, and it can lead into all kinds of strange territory, beginning with Ziusudra who advises in his list, "Never should you buy your prostitutes from the street, for they are the kind of that will usually bite."¹²

"A genuine essay..." writes Cynthia Ozick, "is the movement of the free mind at play."¹³ I believe that parallels can be drawn between the act of "essaying" (which for my purposes here I will define as the act of both writing and reading essay) and the act of make believe, or pretend, play. Both are imagination centered human states that "erupt on the threshold of the cognitive and the physical, the actual and the unreal."¹⁴ Unlike fiction and poetry in which the writer may choose to completely ignore, subvert, or redefine the

¹⁰ Philip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, find exact page

¹¹ John D'Agata, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, p. 5

¹² Ziusudra, *The List of Ziusudra*, translated by Joshua Barnes, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, p. 7

¹³ Cynthia Ozick, *She: The Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body*, *Essayists on the Essay*

¹⁴ Karen Russell, "The Paradoxical Usefulness of Nonutilitarian Motion, A.K.A 'Play'," *The Writer's Chronicle*, Volume 48, Number 3, p. 34-35

“facts” of our physical reality and existence, the essayist must balance him or herself on that slippery threshold we call reality and explore it as their playground.

I believe that this pursuit of the real within the essay reframes the relationship between the writer and reader, and changes the stakes of the experience on both ends. Being confronted with information and/or experience that has been lived, or lifted from reality, by the writer, the reader’s is “enjoined” into the text, called upon as “witness, interloper, eavesdropper.” The reader is placed “where one is not supposed to be.”¹⁵ I believe this proximity fosters intimacy between the writer and reader, and has the potential, by way of self-disclosure or personal revelation, to create a deeper level of shared experience.

Pretend play can generate a deep level of shared experience as well. To this point, I’ll share a personal anecdote. As a child, I often played a pretend play game with the other children on my street, which we called “Ghost Ranch.” The game was mostly of my own design. Like many children, I was anxious (or to be more accurate, deeply disturbed) by the presence of death in the world, and I acted out my death anxiety through the Ghost Ranch game. In the game, there were two teams, the dead and the living, with the dead starting out as the much smaller team. The living would play out on the lawn with their toys as if nothing were happening, while the dead would hide in the dense shrubbery surrounding armed with hula-hoops and jump ropes. The goal was for the dead to chase and capture the living using the tools listed above and drag them back to one of a few different “bases” hidden deep within the shrubbery. Once dragged there, the captured players were then released as a new member of the dead, and the game would continue

¹⁵ Mary Cappello, *Propositions; Provocations: Inventions, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, p. 66

until all of the living were taken and only the dead remained. No one ever won in this game, which I think is a vital aspect of the pretend play experience, and something that differentiates pretend play from other sorts of game play. In pretend play, the goal of the game engagement is a deep immersion in an experience that hinges on the border between reality and pretense. I believe that in essay, particularly essays with idiosyncratic, “unconventional,” structures, the goal of the reading becomes not to speed to the essay’s conclusion to understanding how it “ends, but rather to slow down and enjoy the particular experience of the “wayward” or “alternate” route the essay provides.

But I digress. Returning to the Ghost Ranch game, all sorts of complicated rules evolved over time, and idea of the Ghost Ranch, which I envisioned as a dark, parallel world of shades shifting through the shrubbery, began to take on more imaginative detail and increase in dimension. There was a well you could be thrown in, for example, and a barn where you could be bound and left alone as a punishment. It was a scary game, and it grew scarier in subsequent iterations. Often younger children would cry or resist being dragged into the bushes, and I, as a primary instigator would be reprimanded by parents for frightening them. But that didn’t stop any of us from the playing it. The pretend world we created glinted over our ordinary lawns, a malevolent, but hypnotic specter.

I’m sure a therapist could have a field day psychoanalyzing how my personal fears and losses fueled the Ghost Ranch game, but what I find really interesting is how through the game I was able to create a merger between my imagination and the imagination of the other children, one successful enough to instill genuine terror. The imaginative merger was successful because it depended on rules, and I often found that the more bizarre and arbitrary the rules I created were, the closer players had to pay

attention to the game, and then deeper they descended into its power. It was the structural framework provided by the rules that allowed for the game to exist, both on the part of the players, and for me, the conceiver, too.

The question I was probing through the Ghost Ranch game, was the question of how to deal with the knowledge of death in the world, and the awful understanding that everyone was I knew and loved was going to die one day, often times while in pain and afraid. It was a question that obsessed me, and I would argue that this game was an early exercise in creative nonfiction or essay. With its essential premise of nonconsensual seizure, the actions of the game reflected not only the content, but also the intention, the burning question, behind it. “The way we organize our material,” Singer writes, “-- the *structure* we are building as the words and ideas, images and facts, spool out along the page-- is an integral part of what a piece of writing is ‘about.’ Form and content, *logos* and *lexis*, are interdependent and synergistic.”¹⁶

In my viewpoint, the fact that the game concluded without any winners or losers is also a good working example of interdependence and synergy between content and form. Having a winner in the game would have destroyed the content, which was the interior struggle to accept the absolutism of death. It was my early take on Sartre’s “No Exit.” (Which, of course, I did not learn about until much, much later in life.)

While engaged in the pretense of pretend play, the group must subscribe to certain rules in order to establish a situation. Their games may not be formless; a certain logic, or particular mode of reasoning¹⁷, must be maintained in order for the game to be shared. The same, I believe can be said, all writing, but particular of essays that violate

¹⁶ Margot Singer, *On Scaffolding, Hermit Crabs, and the Real False Document*, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, p. 77

¹⁷ From the full definition of “logic,” Merriam Webster English Dictionary, 2016

conventions of structure. As we immerse ourselves in this style of essay, our experience as readers is shaped by the writer's manipulations, and the workings of their mind on the page as they engage in the process of intensely subjective associative inquiry. When a reader picks up such an essay, he or she expects "a merger with the author's imagination" to occur. This merger is made possible by the establishment of certain rules, or pattern of reasoning, within the essay. The essayist has the burden, and also the joy, of establishing her own rules for the piece and then teaching the reader to how read the navigate the composition, word by word, line by line.

For me, the essays that feel the most "alive" are the ones that carefully cultivate the "off road" experience for the reader by carefully establishing their own idiosyncratic rules, or modes of reasoning, and then at times, subverting, disrupting, or extending these rules. These unexpected moves force me to pay attention and, when done well, they can produce tension within the composition that pulses momentum from sentence to sentence. I have found that a well-written digression, or shifting of boundaries can produce a similar amount of tension and propulsion in a piece as a tight narrative plot. According to Shields and Vollmer this occurs because, "Breaking the rules involves risk. Risk produces tension. Tension produces energy. Energy produces momentum."¹⁸

All composition, as made artifact, abides by certain conventions, "or qualities that set it apart as *that kind of thing*."¹⁹ This critical (and rigidly conventional) essay will pay special attention to how writers manipulate structure, or self-imposed rules of

¹⁸ Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux-Lectures, Quasi-Letters and "Found" Texts (and other fraudulent artifacts), edited by David Shields and Matthew Vollmer, W.W. Norton and Company, London, 2012, p. 17

¹⁹ Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux-Lectures, Quasi-Letters and "Found" Texts (and other fraudulent artifacts), edited by David Shields and Matthew Vollmer, W.W. Norton and Company, London, 2012, p. 16

composition, for the purposes of the drawing the reader deeper into the “earnest game” of their essay, a “safe world” in which “dangerous truths” may be explored and confronted. In the his own conventional essay *Text Adventures*, Ander Monson, beautifully describes the connection between the exploration that occurs inside pretend game play and the similar explorative experience of “essaying.”

On some level I want to touch every boundary and know that I have explored the entirety of the game’s imagined landscape before moving on. This is the instinct of the essay: we get to pause time and tool around in the world as player/writer, avoiding that objective, however base or obvious or narrative or argumentative, instead following tangent after tangent, the curlicues of this particular brain and its contours, lighting up new spaces on the map bit by bit ...²⁰

As much as I agree with what Monson has written above, I have to say that I feel cautious in endorsing all writing that strives to replicate this kind of digressive experience. Monson also qualifies his enthusiasm for the essay as “the simulation of the mind working its way through a problem,” by stating, “This is not to suggest that every essay is good, revelatory, successful, fruitful, interesting.”²¹

The reason I have chosen to leave this critical thesis in a conventional form is because I want to relate information through it, and I have simply not had enough time to cultivate a more structurally innovative form that will enable me to share this information with a high degree of certainty that the information will be understood in the way I want it to be. Abiding by convention in this case, provides me with a greater certainty that I will achieve my objective.

This is not to say that it is impossible to make a work both structural innovative and deeply informative. I believe that it is possible, but rare. The essays that I have

²⁰ Ander Monson, *Text Adventure*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 84

²¹ Ander Monson, *From the “Essay as Hack,”* Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time, p. 179

chosen to analyze later in this critical work were each chosen because I believe that they succeed in this accomplishment.

Essays, especially structurally innovative essays, have a high failure rate and an often limited shelf life. In my experience as a reader and writer, I have felt myself fall away from the page, and have genuinely gotten lost as a result of the opacity of the content or form or language or all of the above; because the task of reading had simply become too difficult to continue to enjoy, or because I simply no longer understood why the piece of writing mattered. One reason why narrative form can be so attractive is that because of the form's emphasis on time order and conclusion, the task of making a narrative seem as if it matters can be fairly straightforward, at least on a superficial level. (Making the leap from anecdote into true story, however, is another far more challenging task, one that can be discussed elsewhere.) Teleology, from the Greek *teleos*, meaning end or purpose²², is inherent to narrative form. When a writer eschews narrative and the semblance of purpose it provides, it becomes imperative that the writer provides other reasons for the reader to continue with the piece. Poets have been doing this forever, and have many tools at their disposal that are more than up to the task of keeping the reader engaged. The most successful essays relay on many of these same poetic tools, or at least the same meticulous level of attention is bestowed on language and structure in these essays as it is in poetry.

“If writing is a way of thinking,” Kazim Ali writes, “the poem itself offers the best form of structure. It invents its own rules under the making. Neither line, nor form,

²² Definition of “teleology,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2016

nor diction or syntax is taken for granted by the writer. It is anarchic piece of text that lives within boundaries.

This quality of the poem can be taken into prose.”²³

Simply by employing the line break and white space in the manner of poetry, Ali makes his point. The composition must exude its own sense of purposefulness, which can be achieved through deliberate control.

Games, even pretend play games, won't succeed without rules. Essay is not essay unless it is composed, and if it is to be successful, then it must be composed well.

Structure is fundamental to composition. This is not to say that logic cannot be violated or that order cannot be broken to good affect in either a well-structured game or essay. But in order to convince the reader, or player, to “risk the dangerous merger” of imagination offered by both activities, some prospect of satisfaction has to be offered.

The reader enters the essay like a blindfolded man enters a trust fall; as writers it is our duty to convince him something lies beneath to break the fall. The whispered promise of structure can do just that.

II. Pretend Play and the Mind of the Reader

²³ Kazim Ali, *Genre-Queer: Notes Against Generic Binaries*, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, p. 27

I climb with my three-year-old nephew up the rickety wooden steps to his clubhouse, a square white building tacked onto the limbs of a live oak tree. The building has been configured for the bodily dimensions of a young child, and I have to crawl on my hands and knees to follow him up to the second story where we sit at the window and stare out at the green lawn beneath us.

“Look,” he says, “my race car.”

I look to where his finger points and see a small wooden push wagon painted with a black stripe. “Is that really a race car?” I ask, “It looks to me like a pony.”

His face lights up like I have just said the funniest thing possible, one of the many perks of hanging out with a three year old, and he says, “No, no, Auntie, it’s a race car.”

“Are you sure it’s not a pony?” I press. “I thought I heard it neigh just like a pony does.”

“No, it’s a race car,” he repeats, getting a little exasperated now with my obtuseness.

Inside the clubhouse, I see beams and shingles and wooden planks. I hear the rustling of paws on the roof and know it is a squirrel, or maybe a chipmunk or, worse a rat. I touch a smooth clear protrusion at the edge of the window glass and know that it is a pool of dried carpenter’s glue. All of these things, the Spanish moss that hangs outside, the spider spinning its web in the corner, the plastic toys strewn on the rough floor, are very ordinary to me, physical artifacts of the known world. But to my nephew, this

playhouse contains many unknowns, both real and fantastic. At any moment the space could morph into a spaceship, or a submarine, or a lonely jungle post in the outer reaches of Amazonia. The whimsy of the day, set off by stimuli from the outside world-- whatever it is that he has heard, seen, touched, eaten in the previous hours-- free-form into webs of association patterned on a burgeoning notion of pretense, the highly subjective interpretation of reality that shades our every insight into the physical world.²⁴ From a cognitive standpoint my nephew is experiencing a fundamental state of development in which he is learning to differentiate the realities of the physical world from the layers of pretense, or pretend, that envelop it. And critically, he is learning the boundaries of his cognitive self-- who is he? How is he connected to or disconnected from the physical environment surrounding him? What is his place in this loud, urgent, and mysterious world?

According to Lillard, Lerner, et al. my nephew at the age of three is amidst of a “high season” of pretend play. On a daily basis he undertakes activities that experiment with the idea of pretense. These activities are “the subset of play activities, or games, characterized by an “as-if” stance.”²⁵ For instance, my nephew has attached himself to the notion that the wagon is a racecar, thus in his mind the wagon functions “as if” it were a racecar and not, as I tried to insist, a pony-- or a wagon for that matter. “In pretend play a pretense is layered over reality; specifically a pretender knowingly and intentionally projects some mentally represented alternative on the present situation.”²⁶ This can occur

²⁴ Definition (4 b) of “pretense” Oxford English Dictionary, 2016

²⁵ Lillard, Lerner, et al. *The Impact of Pretend Play on Children’s Development: A Review of the Evidence*, American Psychological Association: Psychological Bulletin, 2013, Vol. 139, No. 1, 1-34

²⁶ Lillard, Lerner, et al. *The Impact of Pretend Play on Children’s Development: A Review of the Evidence*, American Psychological Association: Psychological Bulletin, 2013, Vol. 139, No. 1, 1-34

with varying level of adherence to reality, but input “cues” taken from actual experience are generally relied upon as the starting off points for the venture into fantasy.

Of course at the age of three, my nephew’s awareness of the intentional projection of pretense on a situation is still limited, and his immersion into the world of fantasy is as much a result of his lack of knowledge as it is the product of imaginative faculties. But there is no doubt that he engages in pretend play, and at times he is very much aware of the pretense of the situation, ie. he knows he has chosen to believe that banana is a telephone, or the housecat a lion stalking prey on the Savannah. Thus the common expression to “make believe.” As my nephew accumulates in age and experience, he will use pretend play to learn how to “perceive others’ mental states by analogy to the self.”²⁷ Pretend play will also factor into the development of his symbolic reasoning skills and language development.²⁸

In the book “What We See When We Read,” Mendelsund goes into depth to describe the engagement with imagination that occurs during the reading process. As adults we have become fluent enough with language as referent to be able to glean complex layers of meaning from even very abstract language. But just like toddlers engaged in pretend play, our success as readers depends on how readily we are able to subscribe to the pretense established by the writer. When we read, Mendelsund writes, “we subscribe to the belief... that we are passively receiving visions.”²⁹ But what is actually happening is a complex interaction between the writer and reader. “Much of our

²⁷ Lillard, Lerner, et al. *The Impact of Pretend Play on Children’s Development: A Review of the Evidence*, American Psychological Association: Psychological Bulletin, 2013, Vol. 139, No. 1, 1-34

²⁸ Lorraine McCune-Nicolich, *Toward Symbolic Functioning: Structure of Early Pretend Games and Potential Parallels with Language*, Child Development, 1981, Vol. 52 No. 3 p. 785-797

²⁹ Peter Mendelsund, What We See When We Read, p. 349

reading imagination is untethered from the author's text. / (We daydream while reading.)”³⁰

This makes me think of what occurs when pretend play occurs on the group level. Even though there are shared rules the players subscribe to in order to make the game work on a collective level, these rules are consistently being revised and each player's interpretation of them is individual. Similarly, as we engage in the pretense of reading, we open ourselves up to new possibilities, but we are also constricted by our individual imaginations/psyches. The individuality of the reading experience is part of its joy, but it brings with it limitations. While reading, it is easy for the reader to return to familiar associations and interpretations in their “daydreams.”

While once relegated to the domain of early childhood, pretend play is widely considered by psychologists now to be a “lifespan activity,” offering positive cognitive benefits to adults as well as children. “Adults’ engagement in pretend activity can be traced as having the same goal of learning about and making sense of their experiences.”

³¹ Goncun and Perone specifically address in their research how adult engagement in improvisational theater exists as one piece of evidence that pretend play lasts into adulthood, and I would argue that many of the benefits they ascribe to the pretend play of improvisation are equally as present in adults’ experiences as readers. Described benefits of pretend play for adults include...the thrill of creating something new and unplanned,

³⁰ Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read*, p. 294

³¹ Artin Goncun and Anthony Perone, *Pretend Play as a Lifespan Activity*, p. 137

release from the concerns of everyday life, self-confidence, acceptance of failure and foolishness, and the transformation of identity.³²

However, the presence of pretend play as a life span activity in our current society is not just relegated to the small factions of adults who participate in improvisational theater. Other adult forms of pretend play have become more culturally accepted in recent years as well, as evidenced by the proliferation interactive gaming experiences for adults in which the lines between the real and unreal are purposefully blurred. Immersion theater, Real Life Escape Rooms, card and video based role playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons and Minecraft, computer based text adventures (sometimes called interactive fictions),³³ Citysolve Urban Races, the list goes on and on. A few months ago I visited Gameworks (a bar/restaurant arcade featuring everything from old school carnival games to video games) in downtown Seattle on a Friday evening with some other students from my graduate program. It was the first time I had visited Gameworks, or a place like it, in many years and I was struck by the size of the crowd gathered there, and also the diversity represented in the crowd. The area of ages, races, cultural/linguistic backgrounds, income levels, subcultural affiliations, etc. testified to the wide ranging appeal of gaming to grownups in our society.

A critic might point out here that reading differs from many of these other examples of pretend play because it does not incorporate physical action. The supposition might be made that reading is a passive activity, more similar to watching television or film, than participating in a theater performance. However, psychologists have begun to

³² Artin Goncun and Anthony Perone, *Pretend Play as a Lifespan Activity*, p. 144

³³ Ander Monson, *Text Adventures*, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, p. 82

collect a body of research indicating that when it comes to cognitive development reading is anything but a passive activity. Researchers studying the effects of reading on the brain have discovered that “the changes caused by reading a novel were registered in the left temporal cortex, an area of the brain associated with receptivity for language as well as the primary sensorimotor region of the brain. Neurons of this region have been associated with tricking the mind into thinking it is doing something it is not, a phenomenon known as grounded, or embodied cognition.”³⁴

MRI scans taken before and after students completed morning reading assignments found enhanced connectivity between the left the students’ left temporal cortex and the brain’s central sulcus, which is associated with sensations and movement, containing neurons that both control movements of the body and also receive sensory input from other areas of the body.³⁵ Thus there are grounds to believe that as a reader navigates the contents of a book, he experiences the thoughts, feelings, actions of the characters in a way that generates physical impact on the neurons on his body, akin to how visualization in sports activates the same neurons associated with physically playing the sport. As of yet, consumption of visual media, such as film or television, has not demonstrated the same positive cognitive effects.³⁶ Although it may seem counter intuitive, this research places the act of experience of reading as processed by the brain in the same camp as other pretend based activities that incorporate physical action.

³⁴ Christopher, Bergland, “Reading Fiction Improves Brain Connectivity and Function,” *Psychology Today*, 1/4/2014

³⁵ Christopher, Bergland, “Reading Fiction Improves Brain Connectivity and Function,” *Psychology Today*, 1/4/2014

³⁶ Bergland, Christopher, “Reading Fiction Improves Brain Connectivity and Function,” *Psychology Today*, 1/4/2014

The exercise in embodied cognition provided by reading also improves what psychologists call “theory of mind” in the brain, which is the “ability to attribute mental states-- beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc.-- to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one’s own.”³⁷ Theory of mind is essential to development of compassion and empathy, and also helps guide humans through social interaction. In basic forms, for instance as utilized by infants, theory of mind relies on mimicry of direct facial expression and physical actions observed, but at more sophisticated levels it is believed to be guided by “attempted interpersonal reenactment” in which an individual uses mental pretense, or “enactment imagination” to try to construct in oneself a mental state that isn’t generated by the usual triggers of physical experience, mimicry, or memory.³⁸

I think it also bears recognizing that reading offers sophisticated practice in “enactment imagination.” While much of the research so far has centered on how reading narrative fiction generates these effects in the brain, I would argue that reading an essay would produce similar effect, for what could be more challenging for the “enactment imagination” than to directly track the thoughts and feelings of another individual? As Monson writes, “Each of these essays is a kind of frozen thinking, a virtual I that you get to inhabit for a little while. Each is a cheapo virtual reality.”³⁹

Much of the reason why I believe essays make for such stimulating “earnest games” is because of their dual engagement with the outside world of “facts” and the

³⁷ Bergland, Christopher, “Reading Fiction Improves Brain Connectivity and Function,” *Psychology Today*, 1/4/2014

³⁸ Goldman, Alvin, *Theory of Mind*, from the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, 2012

³⁹ Ander Monson, *Vanishing Point*, p. 1

inner worlds of self-analysis, imagination, and revelation. The merging of reality with imagination present in essay creates a unique form of experience that distinguishes it from other forms of reading. According to Lopate,

For all their shared boundaries... the experiences of fiction and nonfiction are fundamentally different. In the short story or novel a fictive space is opened up in which the reader tends to disappear into the action, even to the point of forgetting one is reading. In the best nonfiction... you're always made aware that you are reflecting, by being engaged with a mind at work, not falling into a dream.⁴⁰

Monson describes the effect of narrative on readers as the pleasure of being “pulled along through an arc by an author.”⁴¹ He ascribes this pull as belonging to both the story and essay, and as a general quality of the experience of reading. This concept of the “pull,” Monson juxtaposes against the experience of “agency” sought after by game players. This agency can include “ability to control the character against or inside the narrative,” manipulation of a system to explore,” “achieve goals,” accomplish salient tasks,” and maybe, most importantly “get into complicated emotional territory.”⁴²

I would argue that many essays demand the “agency” of the reader as part of the reading process, and there is a growing understanding of the role of agency on the part of the reader throughout all of literary writing. While the term “interactive fictions” may have been first applied to text based video games, I think that it is clear there is growing interest in interactive fictions (and nonfictions) throughout literature. On the fiction side are works like Jedediah Berry’s The Family Arcana: A Story in Cards, “published as a

⁴⁰ Lopate, Philip, “Curiouser and Curiouser: The Practice of Nonfiction Today,” *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 3-15

⁴¹ Ander Monson, *Text Adventures*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 83

⁴² Ander Monson, *Text Adventures*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 83

poker deck and written to be read in a near infinite number of ways”⁴³ and in nonfiction Ander Monson has written Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir, a book with an accompanying website that the reader is encouraged to explore either by following a series of notations in the printed manuscript or by choosing her own entry point into the story through a series of hyperlinked subject headings.⁴⁴

Writing such as this demands a different level of interaction and participation on the part of the reader than work that depends more heavily on conventions. It represents one end of the spectrum of a type of literature described by Espen Aarseth as “ergodic literature,” meaning “texts in which nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text.”⁴⁵ While this term is usually applied to text that demand a level of physical action for engagement (Mark Danielewski’s House of Leaves is frequently cited as an example because it requires the reader to physically manipulate the book-- hold it upside down or sideways or in front of a mirror-- to read certain text passages⁴⁶), I would argue are structurally innovative essays also require nontrivial effort on the part of the reader, and thus could be classified as ergodic.

In his book, The Pleasure of the Text, Roland Barthes has famously defined texts as taking two forms, “readerly” and “writerly.” “Barthes argues that most texts are *readerly* texts. Such texts are associated with classic texts that are presented in a familiar, linear, traditional manner, adhering to the status quo in style and content. Meaning is

⁴³ Ninepin Press, <http://ninepinpress.com/the-family-arcana>

⁴⁴ Ander Monson, <http://otherelectricities.com/vp/index.html>

⁴⁵ Ander Monson, *Text Adventures*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 86

⁴⁶ Ander Monson, *Text Adventures*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 87

fixed and pre-determined so that the reader is a site merely to receive information.”⁴⁷

There are huge advantages to writing texts in a readerly fashion, one being that the purpose of most writing is the communication of information, something that all readerly texts maintain as a primary goal of their composition.

This is why I have striven, am striving, to make this essay a readerly text, albeit with some adherence to the not-so-readerly conventions of academic writing.

But writerly texts also have their advantages. “... *Writerly* texts reveal [what] the readerly attempt to conceal. The reader, now in a position of control, takes an active role in the construction of meaning. The stable meaning, or metanarratives, of readerly texts is replaced by a proliferation of meanings and a disregard of narrative structure. There is a multiplicity of cultural and other ideological indicators (codes) for the reader to uncover. What Barthes describes as ‘ourselves writing’ is a self-conscious expression aware of the discrepancy between artifice and reality. The writerly text destabilizes the reader’s expectations.”⁴⁸ The advantage of the writerly text is that it is capable of generating a profound connection with the reader through the deeper engagement it requires. I would argue that in the case of essay, writerly essays have the potential to achieve far more than readerly essays do in terms of imparting meaning, but that in order to do succeed, the writer must be very careful to structure the reader’s engagement. Many texts that aspire to being “writerly” fail because rely too heavily on spiraling digression, obtuseness of purpose, or arcane language. One must keep in mind that just as writerly texts demand a

⁴⁷ University of Waterloo, Roland Barthes: Understanding Text, http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~raha/700_701_web/BarthesLO/readerly.html

⁴⁸ University of Waterloo, Roland Barthes: Understanding Text, http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~raha/700_701_web/BarthesLO/readerly.html

higher level of thoughtfulness on the part of the reader, they demand a higher level of thoughtfulness from the writer too. As Dinty Moore writes, “The reader is no passive dummy... [but] The writer has the enormous responsibility to shape the words, the sentences, the paragraphs, the chapters, the metaphors, the language, the texture of every written artifact.”⁴⁹

III- Truthful Struggles

“What I love to read in nonfiction often exists between those poles of what’s verifiable and what’s simply not. I love the in-between, which is where I think the most truthful struggles with reality exist.”

John D’Agata⁵⁰

Eula Biss’s *The Pain Scale* is an excellent example of the tension D’Agata explains in the quote above, and an earnest counting game that descends into a deep exploration of pain and empathy. The essay addresses a sobering question, one that has vexed physicians and philosophers alike for centuries: can we ever really feel what others feel?

Mintz argues that the “lyric essay” is “pain’s most suitable autobiographical genre” as it can “perform the kind of conceptual shift that many theorists of pain have called for, situating the pain along the pathways not just of nerves but of subjectivity of relationships between self and other, imagination and words.”⁵¹ *The Pain Scale* uses the framework of a doctor’s request for the narrator to measure her pain “on a scale from

⁴⁹ Dinty W. Moore, *Positively Negative, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*, p. 181

⁵⁰ John D’Agata, *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 8

⁵¹ Susannah B. Mintz, “Life Writing and Lyrical Pain,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 2011, p. 243-260

zero to ten” to probe the concept of pain, one of the most basic human conditions, and yet also one that continues to confound both doctors and philosophers in its complexity to this day. According to Wall, “[Pain] is a highly personal experience, depending on cultural learning, the meaning of the situation, and other factors that are unique to each individual.”⁵² The zero to ten pain scale takes into account none of those factors. Its limitations are maddening, and significant too. Doctors make life and death decisions based in part of their patients’ ability to express their ailments and symptoms; consequently, a misunderstanding of a patient’s condition can result in injury or death.

In his introduction to *The Pain Scale*, D’Agata writes:

Biss is concerned with the limitations of the pain scale’s form, so it’s fitting that she attempts to confine her own essay to a pain scale’s zero to ten structure. The notion that an experience can be scaled down, so to speak, to the artificial limits of a pain scale is a provocation that invites the reader into [the essay] from the very first glance, even if, as we read on, we don’t know whether Biss’s essay mocks the scale’s structure, demonstrates its futility, or instead shows the scale’s occasional usefulness. This flirtation between content and form is one of many uncertainties (or itches) that keep us reading on.⁵³

In the interview that follows D’Agata’s introduction, Biss describes the difficulties she faced when first approaching the essay as a “more narrative, memory-based personal essay,” however, she found that writing about her personal experience in this approach “was not offering... any new insights.”⁵⁴ For Biss, “this essay served as a reminder of how form can facilitate content. I was not able to say what I wanted to say in this essay until I found the right shape for saying it.”⁵⁵

⁵² Patrick D. Wall, as quoted in “Life Writing and Lyrical Pain,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 2011, p. 243-260

⁵³ John D’Agata, *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 12-13

⁵⁴ Eula Biss, interviewed by Helen Rubenstein, in *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 12-15

⁵⁵ Eula Biss, interviewed by Helen Rubenstein, in *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*

Throughout the essay Biss uses rhyming echoes of content and theme to broaden her inquiry into the pain scale's limitations. Specifically she makes reference to a series of other numerical scales like the "Beaufort Scale, which measures wind; the Wong-Baker Faces scale, designed to assess children's physical pain; Robert Forslund's Alternative Positional Number System, which substitutes the letter A for the number 10; and the relative degrees of the Fahrenheit, Celsius, and Kelvin temperature scales."⁵⁶ It appears that these rhyming echoes also appeared as a result of form facilitating content; Biss has stated that while writing the essay, she "was pursuing some questions around quantification, and accumulating more questions along the way."⁵⁷ At the end she chose to whittle down the essay so that "anything that failed to open up into further thinking, anything that felt to static or boring"⁵⁸ was removed. The result is a highly compressed mediation, dense in both information and inquiry.

As a reader it is possible to be intimidated by how much information is packed into each of its short eleven sections. Biss defines *The Pain Scale* as an "associative essay-- its logic is an associative logic."⁵⁹ Thus the challenge for the reader is to follow Biss through the series of information heavy associations. Personally, I found the use of rhyming echo throughout the essay to be an effective feature of its structure, and also a valuable tool for tracking the movement of Biss's mind through the subject matter.

I have to admit that as a reader, I did not absorb much the secondary information content layered into "*The Pain Scale*" until after my second or third reading of the piece.

While the theme emerged fairly early on in my reading, the combination of information

⁵⁶ Susannah B. Mintz, "Life Writing and Lyrical Pain," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 2011, p. 243-260

⁵⁷ Eula Biss, interviewed by Helen Rubenstein, in *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*

⁵⁸ Eula Biss, interviewed by Helen Rubenstein, in *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*

⁵⁹ Eula Biss, interviewed by Helen Rubenstein, in *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*

density and associative logic made it difficult for me to always track and understand the references Biss chooses to include. I believe my experience as a reader with this piece casts light on a limitation of both *The Pain Scale*, and this form of writing; *The Pain Scale* demands a high, dare I say it, ergodic, level of engagement from the reader, and not only in a single reading, but over multiple readings. For many readers, this would be too much commitment to expect.

But it can be a delight too-- there can be a joy in rereading and finding something new in the text.

In terms of understanding the essay from a structural and thematic perspective, each individual section was important, but section two emerged for me as a kind of informative and thematic lynch pin. In section two the reader is introduced to the Beaufort Scale and the themes of wind and destruction. "Wind, like pain," Biss writes, "is difficult to capture. The poor wind-sock is always striving, and always falling short."

Critically, this is the same section in which Biss contemplates how the "finite" distance between numbers one and two also contains "infinite fractions," and then proceeds forward to compare this distance to the "distance between my mind and my body. My one and my two. My whole and its parts." These lines next usher us into a scene in which doctor asks her, "How do you feel?" "Does this hurt?" "Do you have more or less pain than the last time I saw you?" But Biss is unable to answer the questions. She is being asked to take her experience and flatten it in to a simple response, a task that she cannot achieve, and so she chooses to "act certain," and even to "lie" in order to produce a response.

Another ponderous fact arises here. Pain, she recognizes, especially the pain of treatment, can be “deeply pleasurable.” “I long for it,” she writes.

However, in a searing juxtaposition we receive an immediate refutation of that idea. According to information included by Biss from the International Association for the Study of Pain, “pain must be unpleasant.” Their stern elaboration reads: “Experiences which resemble pain but are not unpleasant should not be called pain.” As a reader I was able to accept the discrepancy between Biss’s experience and the formal definition of pain provided as it is the type of dilemma I confront often enough in my own thinking and experience. However, Biss’s next move in the essay caught me off guard. It was one of those classic “turning into the skid” moves that I value in essays, the kind of writing that uses association to make a leap to a discussion of the second circle of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, a move that at first glance appears to be random, but then quickly coalesces into the thematic heartbeat of the piece.

On the surface level this is a very standard sort of association to make since it continues two major threads in the essay, numbers and hell (which Dante defines throughout his work as varying types of pain and assigns numbers to), but here is where it opens up and truly becomes meaningful: in this second level of hell, Biss writes, the “adulterous lovers cling to each other, whirling eternally, caught in an endless wind.”

Before educating us on the history and function of the Beaufort scale for measuring wind, Biss includes a critical scene fragment in which she and a neighbor discuss their varying interpretations of this second level of hell, “My next-door neighbor, who loves Chagall, does not think this sounds like Hell. I think it depends on the wind.”

Here we move deeper into the subject at hand-- the wildly idiosyncratic nature of our individual experience. Like Pain, Hell has no universality, and even wind, a phenomenon of nature that can be described with specific characteristic, is open to individual human interpretation. We strive to use limits for definition, Biss seems to question here, but how useful are these imposed limits, when on a fundamental level all human-made definition is impacted by subjective perspective? The pain and emotional urgency of the text push up against the numerical scheme, its imposed limits and form. But then, without words, without form, how else would we communicate our pain? How would physicians diagnose and heal us?

The structure of this piece, with its reliance on the comfortable artifact of the one to ten numerical scale, eases us into a deeply uncomfortable session of imaginative play. Pretend, the essay demands, you are in pain, a pain without cause, without respite, without foreseeable conclusion.

The ending of the essay includes a list of questions on pain relief traded by the narrator and her physician father. The dialogue functions like a classic, would you rather game, but with a very earnest twist:

“ ‘Would you, he suggests, visit five specialist and take three prescription narcotics?’ I laugh because I have done just that. ‘Would you,’ I offer ‘give up a limb.’ I would not. ‘Would you surrender your sense of sight for the next ten years?’ my father asks. I would not. ‘Would you accept a shorter life span?’ I might.”⁶⁰

Moving through the questions as a reader, I found myself being immersed deeper and deeper into the narrator’s dilemma. What degree of “devastation”⁶¹ could I bear to

⁶⁰ Eula Biss, *The Pain Scale, We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 24

⁶¹ Eula Biss, *The Pain Scale, We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 24

have occur to my body? Am I brave enough to confront the truth Biss obliquely reveals through the essay?

Painlessness, Biss suggests, is death.⁶² Zero.

IV- The Roll of the Dice

Like *The Pain Scale*, structural innovation is also at the foreground of John McPhee's classic braided essay, *The Search for Marvin Gardens*, an essay that engages this concept of the earnest game in a much more obvious way. The braided structure of *Marvin Gardens* alternates between two narratives. The first is a series of Monopoly games in which a first person narrator is pitted against a shadowy opponent, while in the second a series of scenes intersect with the moves of game as a first person narrator observes the real life Monopoly game locations in Atlantic City, New Jersey, at eye level. Similar to Biss, McPhee relies on the use of an exterior structure, the Monopoly board, to give shape to the thematic content of his writing; however, unlike Biss, McPhee focuses his inquiry on society rather than on the self, specifically fault lines of race and poverty within the American society of the nineteen sixties and seventies as evidenced by the deterioration of Atlantic City, a city not far from his hometown of Princeton, and one that by the mid-seventies had become a "textbook example of poverty and neglect."⁶³

McPhee has written extensively about his writing craft in the *New Yorker*, and has also participated in numerous interviews during his long and prolific career. The topic

⁶² Susannah B. Mintz, "Life Writing and Lyrical Pain," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 2011, p. 243-260

⁶³ Meta G. Carstarphen, "Traveling in Social Spaces: John McPhee's Dichotomies in *Levels of the Game* and "In Search of Marvin Gardens," *Coming into McPhee Country*, p. 256

of structure in prose writing is one that McPhee returns to again and again in discussion of his work. According to McPhee, structure is a continuous “preoccupation”⁶⁴ in his writing. McPhee’s goal is the development of a “strong, sound, and artful structure... that causes people to want to continue turning pages.”⁶⁵

In McPhee’s opinion, in nonfiction writing facts are essential to the development of creative and compelling structure in a narrative.

The approach to structure in factual writing is like returning from a grocery store with materials you intend to cook for dinner. You set them out on the kitchen counter, and what's there is what you deal with, and all you deal with. If something is red and globular, you don't call it a tomato if it's a bell pepper. To some extent, the structure of a composition dictates itself, and to some extent it does not. Where you have a free hand, you can make interesting choices.⁶⁶

In *Marvin Gardens* it is possible to note the distinctive merger McPhee creates between “factual writing” and the “free hand” from the very first section of the essay, a scant three sentences:

Go. I roll the dice-- a six and a two. Through the air I move my token, the flatiron, to Vermont Avenue, where the dog packs range.⁶⁷

Here we move effortlessly from the imagined reality of the game to the physical reality of Vermont Avenue as experienced by the narrator. The next rhetorical move of the essay is to continue with this presentation of the physical reality by zooming into ground level on St. Charles Avenue. Here the reader is provided a detailed description of the dogs, rubble, and debris present on the street. McPhee follows these details with a historical aside about George Meade, the Army engineer who both saved the Union Army

⁶⁴ John McPhee, *Structure*, The New Yorker, 1/14/2013

⁶⁵ John McPhee, *Structure*, The New Yorker, 1/14/2013

⁶⁶ John McPhee, *Structure*, The New Yorker, 1/14/2013

⁶⁷ John McPhee, *The Search for Marvin Gardens*, The Next American Essay, edited by John D’Agata, 2003, p. 9

at Gettysburg and built the lighthouse at the corner of St. Charles and Pacific. The inclusion of the detail of the lighthouse's history is crucial because it demonstrates to the reader another rhetorical move that McPhee will make throughout the essay, reference to historical fact and the real life historical personages that shaped Atlantic City throughout its history. Thus within two short paragraphs McPhee provides a blueprint from which to follow the rest of the essay. The essay will continue to alternate between the imaginary Monopoly tournament, the "best-of-seven series for the international singles championship of the world,"⁶⁸ the classic rhetoric of the travelogue which exploits the idea of "difference versus the cultural norm,"⁶⁹ and finally the historical content regarding both the creation of the city, by railroad baron R.B. Osborne, and of the Monopoly game, by plumber Charles B. Darrow. That we have juxtaposition of creators (railroad baron versus plumber) is crucial here as the essay enfolds into a stark social critique of capitalism, especially its speculative forms, and the wide chasm that exists between the have's and have not's of American society. The social critique runs as an undercurrent beneath the essay and serves as the connective tissue that ties together the three narrative strands.

The success of the structure also depends on more subtle rhetorical moves made by McPhee. McPhee holds the reader's interest captive through the use of skillful use of repetition, juxtaposition, and layering of content. Key words, phrases, and concepts are repeated throughout the essay, and expand in meaning in their repurposing. It is significant, for example, that both his sinister opponent with the fictional Monopoly game

⁶⁸ John McPhee, *The Search for Marvin Gardens*, *The Next American Essay*, edited by John D'Agata, 2003, p. 10

⁶⁹ Meta G. Carstarphen, "Traveling in Social Spaces: John McPhee's Dichotomies in *Levels of the Game* and "In Search of Marvin Gardens," *Coming into McPhee Country*, p. 256

and the original investors that the schemed to profit from the construction of Atlantic City are both called “masters of the quick kill.” It is as if McPhee, though the essay’s subtext, is whispering, Close your eyes, roll the dice, and hope for your opponent’s sudden death. The term Monopoly refers to “exclusive possession”⁷⁰ after all. This exclusive possession is referenced time and again in the fictional game of the essay, in which there are no barterers, no sharing, no trades.

I believe he includes this “shadowy opponent” to further emphasize the theme of “the quick kill” as one method of success in capitalist conquest, but I have to say that as a reader I found the flat depiction of this opponent to be annoying, perhaps because it read to me like a stereotypical caricature of an evil capitalist. Having already absorbed the lesson of capitalism’s destructive tendencies through the “real world” examples, I did not need an extra insertion of fantasy to strengthen his claim.

But there were also times when I find the use of repetition to be effective in *Marvin Gardens*, particularly when it is used for humorous effect. One example of this is the references to French Canadians. We first encounter the presence of French Canadians in Atlantic City as McPhee wanders down the Boardwalk, where the platform as been constructed from “yellow pine and Douglas fir, soaked in pentachlorophenol,” the signs read “Bienvenue,” and “The salt air is full of Canadian French.” Somehow as Atlantic City has fallen out of favor with other tourist demographics, it has interestingly, and oddly, become a destination for the Quebecois. In his later summary of Atlantic City’s decline, McPhee writes:

⁷⁰ Definition of “Monopoly,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2016

The natural history of an American resort proceeds from the Indians to French Canadians via Biddles and Capones. French Canadians, whatever they may be at home, are Visigoths here. Bienvenue Visigoths!

For McPhee, the planned paradise of the “American resort” is constructed over a dark history, which he chooses to satirize here rather than bemoan as he does for much of the rest of essay. For an essay centered in part on a parlor game, *The Search for Marvin Gardens* is rife with depressing content. Through the use of humor, McPhee makes it possible for the reader to stop and reflect on the essay that he could have written. Instead of a joke, McPhee could have cited facts and statistics to inform the reader of the economic disparity existing between the French Canadian tourists and African Americans residents. He could have provided specific anecdotes on the bad tourist behavior of these French Canadians, or shown us heartbreaking episodes of tourist insensitivity to the plight of Atlantic City’s impoverished locals. But those moves would have been altogether too easy, too numbingly familiar. *The Search for Marvin Gardens* succeeds in part as a result of its strangeness, and so McPhee, takes an odd fact about Atlantic City, the presence of French Canadians, and makes it odder-- and also more resonant, with the comparison to Visigoths. Here he makes a smart decision to trust the reader. Already the reader has accompanied him this far on the journey, and has participated in piecing together meaning from the essay’s different threads. Primed for this kind of associative thinking, the reader experiences satisfaction, and a bit of relief, when given the moment to pause and reflect on the boorishness of these French Canadian “Visigoths,” and it is altogether better, in my opinion, that their tourist transgressions exist only the mind of the reader. In my experience reading this essay, the humor of this line, coupled with the

white space that follows it, invited me to laugh, pause, reflect, and take a breath as I moved closer to the essay's conclusion in the next few passages.

But the earnest intent of this essay is to represent the dark side of the capitalist game, as well as the high costs paid by the players, whose experience of success or failure is based primarily on luck or fate (as demonstrated in how the rolls of the dice bring success or failure in McPhee's fictional game.) Nowhere in the essay is this dark side more apparent in than the Atlantic City municipal jail, which McPhee returns to repeatedly. With each return to the jail, the reader witnesses new examples that illustrate the unfairness of incarceration in this society.

Throughout the repetitions McPhee rotates, or rather pivots, between these different themes. The first visit to the jail establishes it as the dark heart of the essay. In this visit McPhee observes two incarcerated soldiers attended by a military policeman. As the police sergeant ushers the soldiers back into the holding cell, he warns, "Don't you guys kill yourselves back there now." This is not a hyperbolic threat. Only hours before a kid "overdosed himself" within a holding cell. We do not learn the race of the soldiers or military policeman, but we do learn that the sergeant is black, which might run counter to our supposition, given the fact that McPhee has already established the reality of black American poverty and disenfranchisement in Atlantic City in the essay. Yet, it is important that McPhee's next move is to observe the release of a young white man from custody. This young man is "out of jail, free." This nicely echoes the language of the Monopoly game, and it is also followed by a sort of peculiar aside, which I also find to be quite important to the development of essay. Why was this young man jailed? According to McPhee, he had "offended Atlantic City in some way." This language is reminiscent of

the arbitrariness of the Monopoly game in which it is possible to draw the wrong card from Community Chest and have all manner of bad penalties inflicted on you. But doesn't life function like that at times as well? Isn't possible to unintentionally anger authorities and bring down their wrath by making only a small misstep? McPhee highlights this connection between the game and life by including a bit of trivia. "In the nineteen-thirties, men visiting Atlantic City went to jail, directly to jail, did not pass Go, for appearing in topless bathing suits on the beach." The rules infringed on us in life, he implies here, can be as strange and as arbitrary as in any parlor game.

The inclusion of this reflection on the arbitrary nature of rules invites a reflection on structure and content. There are times when the structure, or rules, that govern *Marvin Gardens* feel arbitrary. There are times in the essay when the structure feels natural, such as when we zoom down to the ground level of a real life location in Atlantic City, following the movement of the game board, but there are also instances, particularly when the essay returns repeatedly to the jail, when the structure feels didactic, and even preachy. In order to better understand McPhee's choice to include the jail as a recurrent element in the structure of the essay, I have had to reflect on the time in which he was writing. It is possible that the audience for *Marvin Gardens* may not have been as aware of racial inequality in the criminal justice system as a contemporary audience would be. This injustice may also have been a highly sensitive, and may be even inflammatory, cause to take on when the piece was written. According to Miller and Paola, essays that deal with sensitive or difficult topic matter often adopt a "hermit crab" structure. This type of essay:

...appropriates other forms as an outer covering to protect its soft underbelly. It's an essay that deals with material that seems to have been born without its own carapace--

material that's soft, exposed, tender, and must look elsewhere to find the form that will best contain it.⁷¹

Privilege, which in the context of the essay and much of American society includes racial privilege, factors greatly into how people experience the “game.” The structure of the essay as a game enables to McPhee to address this tender and painful reality.

But McPhee is savvy enough to manipulate the structure to achieve different effects. He builds a rhyming echo of privilege into the structure of the essay's fictional Monopoly game when he uses his presence in jail as an advantage against his opponent. “Jail,” McPhee notes here, “at times, is the strategic place to be.” But by the time the reader receives this bit of wisdom, the reader has also been exposed to the true horror of the Atlantic City jail, a place where “The prisoners sleep on bunks of butcher block. There are no mattresses. There are three prisoners to a cell. In the winter, it is cold in here. Prisoners burn newspapers to keep warm. Cell corners are black with smudge.” From this description it is clear that jail is only the strategic place to be if you have advantages like McPhee's. The description of the jail is followed by the portrait of a Black youth who has been left to languish alone for three days in an “utterly silent” cellblock reserved for juvenile boys. When questioned as to why he has been detained, he states simply, “I hit a jitney (cab) driver.” The reader cannot help but remember this youth when a few sections later an anecdote is related about Anthony J. Drexel Biddle, an Atlantic City financier and gangster, who once famously “hit an Atlantic City streetcar conductor with his fist, laid him out with one punch.” But unlike the youth, Biddle

⁷¹ Quoted by Margot Singer, *On Scaffolding, Hermit Crabs, and the Real False Document*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 78

suffered no repercussion for his action; in fact this act of violence only “increased Biddle’s legend. He did not go to jail.”

The examples above are representative of McPhee’s masterful use of juxtaposition, a technique McPhee relies on heavily in this essay, as he does throughout much of his writing. While mining factual content for an essay, McPhee is always in search of juxtapositions within the content to guide his structure:

You look for good juxtapositions. If you’ve got good juxtapositions, you don’t have to worry about what I regard as idiotic things, like a composed transition. If your structure really makes sense, you can make some jumps and your reader is going to go right with you. You don’t need to build all these bridges and ropes between the two parts.⁷²

The structure of *The Search for Marvin Gardens* encompasses layers of repetition and juxtaposition. While the presentation of the jail speaks to the arbitrariness and, often, unfairness of the power structure in Atlantic City, the presentation of the pools and beaches reflect the disintegration of community and the large-scale retreat into private spaces by both visitors to and residents of Atlantic City. Once prized for its beaches and boardwalk, as Atlantic City was subsumed by “deep and complex decay,” people abandoned these shared spaces for private hotel pools. The narrator’s trip to the top of the Solarium, the highest point in town, reveals a startling sight that reflects this trend:

“...Panoramic view of the ocean, the bay, the saltwater ghetto. I look down at the rooftops of the side avenue motels and into swimming pools. There are hundreds of people around the rooftop pools, sunbathing, reading-- many more people than are on the beach.”

At this point in the essay the reader has already undertaken an unsparing tour of the wreckage of Atlantic City, with its rows of abandoned houses and streets littered with

⁷² Peter Hessler, *John McPhee Interview*, “The Art of Nonfiction No. 3,” *The Paris Review*, Spring 2010

broken glass. We understand fully why people might choose to shut themselves away from the surrounding chaos and disorder-- and yet, something important is lost when this occurs. On the rooftop pools, all that is visible are "Walls, windows, and a block of sky... no sand, no sea."

The presence of these pools, and the privatization and retreat from public life they represent, sets us up for the final disclosure of the essay-- the location of the missing "Marvin Gardens." Throughout his tour of Atlantic City, the narrator is able to one by one identify the various landmarks from the Monopoly game, but "Marvin Gardens" continues to elude him. One hotel clerk asks in all seriousness if Marvin Gardens is a "floral shop." Marvin Gardens is an anomaly, a missing piece, and when McPhee finally discovers it at the conclusion of the essay, McPhee uses this discovery to advance both the essay's themes of the destructiveness of Capitalist games, and also the social commentary on the state of Atlantic City during the writing of the essay. Marvin Gardens, it turns out, is a suburban enclave outside of the city. Unlike the rest of the Atlantic City, it has survived more or less intact; however, the reasons for its survival are not broadly applicable to the survival of American society at large. In fact it indicates that within American capitalism, isolation, a state only achievable for a small portion of society, is necessary if you want to survive, or better yet, thrive.

"Marvin Gardens, the ultimate outwash of Monopoly," McPhee writes, "is a citadel and sanctuary of the middle class." In order to maintain its level of security and order, a resident discloses that it is "heavily patrolled by police." "We don't take no chances," she states plainly. The implication here, I believe, is that just as in the game of Monopoly there is a clear winner, and also losers, in the real world of American

capitalism, the winners are few, and can they ascribe their position to a combination of privilege, chance, and heavy use of institutional power structure to preserve their protected status. By the end of the essay McPhee demands that the reader question the conditions of success and failure that have been imposed on American society by its current form of capitalism, and by extension also question whether or not these conditions insist on a willingness to accept that society will include “winners” and “losers” whose status is relegated not so much by achievement as whether or not the roll of the dice played out in their favor.

Life under American capitalism, McPhee admonishes in *Marvin Gardens*, is a very earnest game.

V-- The Structure Interrogates Itself

“A good bit of the writing process is trying to suppress conscious thought enough that you can allow some of what’s beneath to bubble up and make itself manifest in the world. I don’t believe that good art can come from a place of conscious thought or intention. It comes from someplace else, someplace darker. Then once that thing gets halfway into the world, our job is to apply conscious thought and craft to allow it to take its best and most interesting shape.”

Ander Monson⁷³

Recursion begins in the repetition of the word “outline” in the title of Monson’s essay, *Outline Towards a Theory of the Mine Versus the Mind and the Harvard Outline*, and this spiraling effect reoccurs throughout the essay, which questions the form of the outline, specifically the well-known Harvard outline, by being written inside the form, generating a “hall of mirrors”⁷⁴ effect on the reader. The structural decision to write a

⁷³ Ander Monson, interviewed by Robin Hemley, from Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction, p. 112-113

⁷⁴ John D’Agata, We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay, p. 64

critique of the outline in the form of the outline allows Monson to immediately leap into territory that for me as a reader felt dangerously new. Each of its spare lines thrums with tension, and while many of them make unexpected departures in content, the outline demands that all of the loose strings adhere, somehow, to something that has already been written in the outline. To read this essay is to marvel at how far Monson is able to stretch the outline's reaches while still continuing to return to the central premise of the thesis he develops within it: the struggle that ensues when the writer chooses to utilize the "the flawed form" of the outline to show the reader the "absurdity of attempting to standardize the expression of our thoughts or the structure of that expression."⁷⁵In this essay, Monson "investigates the form despite its imperfections and its inability to hold together,"⁷⁶ but also is willing to admit that flawed as it may be, there is beauty and elegance to be found within the structure of the outline as well. Monson writes:

"b. though there is pleasure to this iteration, this recursion-- like mathematics and the algorithms I played with and admired in computer science classes, writing functions that called themselves

- i. which called themselves
 - 1. which called themselves
 - a. until they were satisfied
 - 2. and exited
 - ii. right back
- c. out
 - i. like those Russian nesting (matryoshka) dolls; a lovely symmetry; such satisfaction comes in nesting
 - ii. such starkness
 - 1. elegance),

⁷⁵ John D'Agata, We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay, p. 65

⁷⁶ John D'Agata, We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay, p. 65

Monson furthers this disclosure of the elegance that can be found in “top down structuralist method” with reference to the “elegant mechanism of concordance” developed by Google founders Larry Page and Sergi Brin, whose search engine revolutionized the organization of information by “ranking [web] searches by the number of pages that link to each individual page or site in order to establish the relative importance of that initial page or site.” But just as quickly as he establishes the elegance and usefulness of the Harvard Outline and Google, he begins to apply pressure to their limitations with his move to section II of the outline, a section that moves, at first incongruously, to a focus on “industrial mining, his family’s history with mining and how the technology of retrieving precious metals from the earth has left Upper Michigan full of ghost towns.”⁷⁷

Within this section Monson’s first move is to disclose a family history of mining for “copper, iron, the cast-off leftover materials necessary to process ore from rock.” I find the terms “cast-off” and “leftover” to be especially important here. While the previous section comments on the spare beauty of the outline, Google, the limited “mind,” Monson undercuts these previous assertions by demonstrating that there is value to be found in what is cast-off, and, importantly, that he is the inheritor of a tradition of extracting value from “leftover materials.”

While the aim of the piece is at least partly autobiographical, the form of the outline leaves little room to illustrate important instances from Monson’s life. But small, almost casual asides allow this larger autobiographical material to make an imprint. One piece of “cast-off” material that retains a haunting presence throughout the piece is the

⁷⁷ John D’Agata, *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 65

allusion to his mother's death. The "burrowing form of the outline," leads him to acknowledge Monson's mother's death. The outline admits it as a profound influence on his life, but also precludes him from being able to address its influence at greater length. "...the recognition of her death," D'Agata writes, "is immediately lost in a subheading, rushed past as the structure of the outline forces him onward before there is any chance for the kind of messy human response..."⁷⁸

A poet as well as a prose writer, Monson moves toward poetry in this section by choosing to "show" rather than "tell" the reader "how the outline may be a destructive technology that endangers human expression in the same ways that mining endangers of the towns of Upper Michigan." Perhaps the take away here is that just as mining caused the birth and subsequent destruction of Upper Michigan, while structure of the outline is allowing him to "create" this piece of memoir, it is also acting as a destructive force against it. One gets the sense of Monson challenging himself in this piece. It feels like he has taken on a very difficult puzzle, a very earnest game, and he is determined to see it through to its end.

Monson does employ tactics to make our accompaniment of his strenuous efforts enjoyable. Lyrical sentences invite us to contemplate the beauty and strangeness that can be found in the mines, even suggesting that touring an abandoned mine is "absolutely worth doing" and "a necessary experience/ to get to that absolute darkness." These lines bring me back to earlier quote in which Monson states, "I don't believe that good art can come from a place of conscious thought or intention. It comes from someplace else, someplace darker." Art, he is saying here, does not arise from the Harvard Outline-- and

⁷⁸ John D'Agata, *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 67

yet, critically, he accepts that art requires form. He captures this contradiction of formlessness and form in literature, by choosing to describe what it is like to descend into a mine, and then, suddenly, unexpectedly, shifting back to comment on form and the essay:

- iv. how there's a sort of pressure from the outside structure
 - 1. how the structure
 - a. either binds you in or wants to expel you like a sickness
 - b. think the mine, the outline, as a body
 - c. an ecosystem
 - d. or a mechanical spring
 - i. compress
 - ii. release
 - iii. repeat
 - v. and that structure creates pressure; how architecture is the elegant distribution of stress

I believe these lines address an important contradiction in the writing process, and perhaps in the creation of all art. In order to achieve artistry, the writer must “suppress conscious” thought and yet, be able, to eventually use conscious thought to eventually choose a form for the piece, and embark on a series of very conscious decisions that will determine what the piece will become. In my own writing I struggle with form, and I still have never succeeded in joining content and form in a manner that fully realizes my intentions for the work. This essay, and my inability to arrive at an innovative structure for it, is one example of this failure.

In section III of the outline, Monson moves toward personal and familial history, which he is always careful to connect back to mining and outlining, the process of

recursion continually haunting the essay. Even when it appears he has pushed the outline to the very brink, that the associative leap has landed too far, there is no going back, he returns, and in his return imparts a new level of significance to the original subject matter. Everything comes together, splendidly, and a bit scarily too, when he writes:

- “i. so maybe the outline is a kind of
architecture I am trying to erect
- ii. to protect myself against my
family, meaninglessness, and
the future
 - 1. an artifice to get inside
the past
 - 2. like a cold an unlit hole
--what family tragedy
is there behind me,
glittering like a vein

The process of mining for ore is likened to the mining of one’s life for essay material. The artifice of the outline, and the essay, is something to hide within, but like the mine shaft it is also a “cold and unlit hole.” It is actually this image of darkness that Monson chooses to leave the reader with at the end of the essay, when the essay questions what it was like to be stuck at the bottom of the mine shaft, candles burnt out, “no way of lighting up again, and no way/ iii. back out.” In my reading, this final line addresses the anxiety the writer may feel when trying to mine the “dark, unconscious place” from which art emerges, while D’Agata interprets another fear as present at the end of the essay, a fear that “imposing any “top-down structuralist method” (like the Harvard Outline or even Google) on our attempts to communicate information through writing might reduce our information to nothing more than a commodity that we churn

out and use rather than treasure.”⁷⁹ In any case, these final lines are taut with anxious tension and I agree with D’Agata’s interpretation as much as my own. In fact so much of what I enjoy about *Outline Towards a Theory of the Harvard Outline* is how it utilizes layering effects similar to both *The Pain Scale* and *The Search For Marvin Gardens* so that different conclusions, and questions, might arise from reader’s interpretations of the writing.

D’Agata states that one of Monson’s goals in *Outline* is to “startle” the reader by portraying the outline in the act of “devouring itself.”⁸⁰ Line by line, word by word, Monson restricts himself to the confines of the exacting rules of the Harvard Outline, and then by slowly easing the form’s constrictions allows the writing to experience a form of release from the outline’s pressure so that it might “bubble up and make itself manifest in the world.”⁸¹

VI- Conclusion

Like the term “lyric essay,” the term “earnest game” is a form of oxymoron. Games, are supposed to be for the sake of amusement, and amusement is meant to be fun - how is it then that a game can be called “earnest” when earnest means, “seriousness of intention, as opposed to jest or play”?⁸² I like how this oxymoronic phrasing invites questions. By conflating two disparate terms, it provokes us to reflect on what each term really means.

⁷⁹ John D’Agata, *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 67

⁸⁰ John D’Agata, *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, p. 67

⁸¹ Ander Monson, interviewed by Robin Hemley, from *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction*, p. 112-113

⁸² Definition of “Earnest,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2016

Personally I am not a huge fan of the term “lyric essay.” It seems strange to me that essays would need to have their purpose announced by an adjective label. I do think, however, that the impulse to assign the term “lyric” to some essays comes out of a cultural anxiety that centers around seriousness of intention, one that produces a binary mode of thinking in which “work” and “play” emerge as absolutes on different ends of a spectrum. However, if we are to look to psychology and neurobiology, science is beginning to clearly prove that the “embodied cognition” that occurs while human beings are engaged in the activity of pretend play has real tangible benefits. The implication, I believe, is that we need to redefine our society’s perspective on seriousness, and as Russell writes, “fight to preserve a space to wander, where movement is its own reward.”⁸³ In a society in which work and productivity optimization is considered to be of utmost importance, it can feel risky, to engage in the “serious game of experimentation.”⁸⁴

I believe the argument can be made that any genre of literature can produce a level of immersion for the reader that is cognitively similar to the experience of pretend play. Both forms of immersion exist in a variety of forms and are highly subjective states. But I think that the essay does offer a unique take on this immersion because of how it engages with the “lure and blur of the real.”⁸⁵ The essay is a demanding form, and the more I read it, and attempt to write it, the more aware I have become of the challenges it presents.

⁸³ Karen Russell, “*The Paradoxical Usefulness of Nonutilitarian Motion, A.K.A ‘Play’*,” *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Volume 48, Number 3, p. 39

⁸⁴ Karen Russell, “*The Paradoxical Usefulness of Nonutilitarian Motion, A.K.A ‘Play’*,” *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Volume 48, Number 3, p. 40

⁸⁵ David Shields, *Reality Hunger*, p. 5

In the end it is perhaps this aspect of challenge that makes the most satisfying essays similar to the most “earnest” sessions of pretend play. Both require a seriousness of intention, and both produce pleasure, the dual pleasure of “self forgetting” and “confrontation” I referenced in my introduction. I would argue that the seriousness and pleasure both result from challenge. In order to really get out of our own skins, we need something else to enter into. Through structure, both literature and pretend play games offer us something to enter, a method by which what is most soft, exposed, and tender can be contained safely, bundled up, confronted. This “safe confrontation” can induce pleasure, learning. But in essay specifically, as a result of tracking the consciousness of another individual on the page, we never completely forget who we are, or where we stand, in relation to what we are experiencing as readers. The dream-state of the essay is an enjoined experience; the reader and writer are inextricably linked. Personally, I enjoy reading narrative fiction most when the author leaves the room. Then I am alone with the characters and the setting and I can project upon both whatever I wish to. The writer’s presence is certainly there, but it is faint. I am rarely in dialogue with him or her directly. I can chose to ignore the writer and focus on my own dreams, which I often want to do. But when I read a successful essay, the writer is always in the room, not just in the room, but breathing down my neck. The writer is actively pulling me out of my skin, and into their own. The structure I enter through the essay is the writer’s own skin.

That would be graphic in real life, wouldn’t it? To enter another person’s skin. I believe that when most successful, the process is graphic on the page as well, and that might be why we see the essay stretch out into so many different shapes.

I think of the Ghost Ranch game I played as a child, how we would seize, and be seized, drag and be dragged back into the dense leaves. Both of the roles in that act of pretend play were difficult-- different, yes, but still difficult. The same can be said of the roles of reader and writer in the essays I examined in this critical thesis. You cannot drift away into your own dream while reading them. The intricacy of the composition necessitates that awareness of every word, because every word presents the opportunity to “turn into the skid.”

To ascend, or descend, into the “oblique leap.”

Monson, lover of technology, exuberant, and often optimistic in his writing, sees a bright future for this form of the essay:

Maybe these [essays] ask more from readers, but shouldn't we be encouraging readers to be more ambitious? Isn't that the point of writing? And reading? What we get out of these kinds of bookplay is engagement, deeper more complicated fun, a bigger more immersive entertainment better suited for our age. Which is what we're all after, right?⁸⁶

Yes, Monson, I agree with you. But maybe, just maybe, because I am on your team.

⁸⁶ Ander Monson, *Text Adventure*, Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction, p. 90