

# **Playable Stories**

**Writing and Design Methods that Negotiate Narrative and Player Agency**

Volume 1 of 2

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## Creative Project Abstract

The creative project of this thesis is a script prototype for *Underland*, a crime drama video game and digital playable story that demonstrates writing and design methods for negotiating narrative and player agency. The story is set in October 2006 and players are investigative psychologists given access to a secure police server and tasked with analysing evidence related to two linked murders that have resulted in the arrest of journalist Silvi Moore. The aim is to uncover what happened and why by analysing Silvi's flat, calendar of events, emails, texts, photos, voicemail, call log, 999 call, a map of the city of Plymouth and a crime scene. It is a combination of story exploration game and digital epistolary fiction that is structured via an *authored fabula* and *dynamic syuzhet* and uses the *Internal-Exploratory* and *Internal-Ontological* interactive modes to negotiate narrative and player agency. Its use of this structure and these modes shows how playable stories are uniquely positioned to deliver *self-directed* and *empathetic emotional immersion* simultaneously. The story is told in a mixture of *enacted*, *embedded*, *evoked*, *environmental* and *epistolary narrative*, the combination of which contributes new knowledge on how writers can use mystery, suspense and dramatic irony in playable stories. The interactive script prototype is accessible at [underlandgame.com](http://underlandgame.com) and is a means to represent how the final game is intended to be experienced by players.

## Thesis Abstract

This thesis considers writing and design methods for playable stories that negotiate narrative and player agency. By approaching the topic through the lens of creative writing practice, it seeks to fill a gap in the literature related to the execution of interactive and narrative devices as a practitioner. Chapter 1 defines the key terms for understanding the field and surveys the academic and theoretical debate to identify the challenges and opportunities for writers and creators. In this it departs from the dominant vision of the future of digital playable stories as the ‘holodeck,’ a simulated reality players can enter and manipulate and that shapes around them as story protagonists. Building on narratological theory it contributes a new term—the *dynamic syuzhet*—to express an alternate negotiation of narrative and player agency within current technological realities. Three further terms—the *authored fabula*, *fixed syuzhet* and *improvised fabula*—are also contributed as means to compare and contrast the narrative structures and affordances available to writers of live, digital and live-digital hybrid work. Chapter 2 conducts a qualitative analysis of digital, live and live-digital playable stories, released 2010–2016, and combines this with insights gained from primary interviews with their writers and creators to identify the techniques at work and their implications for narrative and player agency. This analysis contributes new knowledge to writing and design approaches in four interactive modes—*Internal-Ontological*, *Internal-Exploratory*, *External-Ontological* and *External-Exploratory*—that impact on where players are positioned in the work and how the *experiential narrative* unfolds. Chapter 3 shows how the knowledge developed through academic research informed the creation of a new playable story, *Underland*; as well as how the creative practice informed the academic research. *Underland* provides a means to demonstrate how making players protagonists of the experience, rather than of the story, enables the coupling of *self-directed* and *empathetic emotional immersion* in a way uniquely available to digital playable stories. It further shows how this negotiation of narrative and player agency can use a combination of *enacted*, *embedded*, *evoked*, *environmental* and *epistolary narrative* to employ dramatic irony in a new way. These findings demonstrate ways playable stories can be written and designed to deliver the ‘traditional’ pleasure of narrative and the ‘newer’ pleasure of player agency without sacrificing either.

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## List of Contents

### Volume 1

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <u>Title Page</u>   | <u>1</u> |
| <u>Creative Project Abstract</u>                                    | <u>2</u> |
| <u>Thesis Abstract</u>  | <u>3</u> |
| <u>Acknowledgements</u>   | <u>4</u> |
| <u>List of Contents</u>   | <u>5</u> |
| <u>List of Figures</u>  | <u>6</u> |
| <u>Epigraph</u>   | <u>7</u> |
| <u>Creative Project: Playable Story script for <i>Underland</i></u> | <u>8</u> |

### Volume 2

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <u>Title Page</u>  | <u>1</u>   |
| <u>Epigraph</u>  | <u>2</u>   |
| <u>Thesis Introduction</u>   | <u>3</u>   |
| <u>Chapter 1: Defining the Field of Playable Stories: Challenges and Opportunities for Writers and Creators</u>                | <u>18</u>  |
| <u>Chapter 2: A Close Analysis of Existing Writing and Design Practices, Methods and Interactive Modes in Playable Stories</u> | <u>59</u>  |
| <u>Chapter 3: The Development of <i>Underland</i> as a Playable Story</u>  | <u>99</u>  |
| <u>Conclusion</u>  | <u>122</u> |
| <u>References</u>  | <u>138</u> |

## List of Figures

### Volume 1

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Figure 1: <i>Underland</i> script prototype splash page at <a href="http://underlandgame.com">underlandgame.com</a> | 8  |
| Figure 2: <i>Underland</i> player login page  | 14 |
| Figure 3: <i>Underland</i> main interface: a secure police remote server  | 15 |
| Figure 4: <i>Underland</i> calendar index page  | 16 |
| Figure 5: <i>Underland</i> email index page   | 20 |
| Figure 6: <i>Underland</i> text index page  | 21 |
| Figure 7: <i>Underland</i> interactive locations map  | 22 |
| Figure 8: <i>Underland</i> call log (all) index   | 32 |
| Figure 9: <i>Underland</i> call log (missed) index  | 32 |
| Figure 10: <i>Underland</i> voicemail index page  | 33 |
| Figure 11: <i>Underland</i> playlist sample   | 34 |

### Volume 2

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Figure 12: Examples of Blizzard Entertainment Inc. script formats                                | 11  |
| Figure 13: Flowchart guide to all endings in <i>The Stanley Parable</i>                          | 61  |
| Figure 14: Copy of synopsis given out in the queue to <i>The Drowned Man</i>                     | 75  |
| Figure 15: A page from <i>Gone Home</i> writer Steve Gaynor's notebook                           | 79  |
| Figure 16: Character representations in <i>Everybody's Gone To The Rapture</i>                   | 85  |
| Figure 17: Pictures Barlow has received of notes players have made as they play                  | 87  |
| Figure 18: Graphic depiction of the Hero's Journey   | 94  |
| Figure 19: Timeline of <i>Underland's</i> development in form                                    | 102 |
| Figure 20: Representations of characters in <i>The 39 Steps</i> , <i>EGTTR</i> and <i>Tacoma</i> | 111 |
| Figure 21: Impact of fabula/syuzhet choices on narrative and player agency                       | 131 |

## **Epigraph**

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” – F.  
Scott Fitzgerald