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“The Ending Has Not Yet Been Written”: How *Myst*, *S.*, and Other Transmedia Creations Pay Tribute to the Analog in a Digital World

Abstract

With the arrival of new media comes the age-old anxiety that more traditional media – namely tangible forms like the print book – will be displaced, abandoned, or forgotten entirely. However, the book continues to be incorporated into sculptures that surround libraries and clothing and tote bags that we purchase, signifying that the traditional codex holds a lasting place in our hearts. This paper argues that newer forms of media can function as outlets for our love of physical manuscripts and can renew our infatuation with them rather than threaten to replace them. Digital media like Rand and Robyn Miller’s 1993 computer game *Myst*, as well as transmedia like J.J. Abrams’ and Doug Dorst’s digitally supplemented novel *S.* use immersive techniques to recreate the feeling of “losing ourselves” in a good book, intensifying a desire to explore and discover in the physical world and the virtual world alike. Moreover, this paper utilizes Jay David Botler’s and Richard Grusin’s theory of remediation to suggest that transmedia has the potential to inform new engagement with the physical world, as is evident in trends like escape rooms and geocaching.

Author Keywords

Remediation; mixed media; transmedia; computer games; materiality

Introduction

On Christmas morning in 1997, I unwrapped a giant Holstein-print box that would irreversibly change my relationship with information and media. Inside was the Gateway 2000 computer that replaced our family’s aggressive green and black MS-DOS interface with colorful graphics and menus, our dot matrix printer with a slick new way to make fliers and greeting cards. The Gateway also came with a small binder of CD-ROM games, one of which was Rand and Robyn Miller’s bestselling *Myst*. Once our computer was set up in the laundry room, I disappeared for hours at a time to play. Nothing seemed to exist outside of the virtual island as I gathered clues, solved puzzles, or sometimes just wandered around to see what other scenery and surprises awaited me. Curious, my mom eventually joined in on the *Myst* action. We grumbled together as we tried to direct water through the pipes of Channelwood and broke into dinner table arguments over which brother to trust – much to my dad’s confusion.

Twenty years after *Myst* first captivated me, I was assigned J.J. Abrams’ and Doug Dorst’s book *S.* in a course for my master’s degree program at the University of Maryland. I read *S.* urgently,

hungry for more, in a way that I had not read a book in ages. Abrams' and Dorst's creation accompanied me to oil changes and doctors' offices, and on more than one occasion I balanced the heavy tome on the handles of my home exercise bike. The faster I pedaled, the more eagerly I read. But not long after finishing *S.*, I realized that while my parents had eventually set limits on my computer time as a child, they had never done so with my reading. In fact, after completing my fourth degree in English, I must acknowledge that they always *encouraged* me to disappear into books. My parents would have been delighted and impressed if I had picked up a book as immersive as *S.* when I was younger. Spending the same amount of time on a computer game that was just as wondrous concerned them, however, and my mom eventually felt silly for her own preoccupation with whether Sirrus or Achenar was telling us the truth.

Myst arrived on retail shelves at the end of the 20th century. It marked the end of an analog era, a pause before the advent of smartphones, tablets, e-Readers, and memorizing the WiFi passwords of our favorite coffee shops. Now well into the 21st century, anxieties surrounding digital media lie at the center of our culture. We depend on electronic devices and applications to accomplish tasks and remain connected, but also seek out digital wellbeing programs to help us cultivate balanced relationships with technology. The clash between digital and analog is largely driven by the fear that digital devices will eclipse our engagement with the real world, and the two mediums are so strictly opposed in our minds that it is often difficult to imagine them existing in harmony. This clash also fuels our nostalgia for print media – like books – that we fetishize when faced with a changing media landscape.

My paper argues that Rand and Robyn Miller's *Myst* is an immersive electronic experience that encourages us to read more rather than less, a form of digital media that pays homage to the physical book and, more broadly, to sensory "real world" experience. Furthermore, *Myst* has paved the way for other transmedia (like Abrams' and Dorst's *S.* and the online platform *Second Life*) to glorify analog books and libraries while simultaneously nudging us into the future. These creations redefine our ideas of *text*, *story*, and even *book* through remediation, or as Steve Jones puts it, they "remind us of what we know but are continually tempted to forget: that no text...is an island" (Jones, 1997, p. 2).

Literature Review

Immersive video games like *Myst* have been previously praised for their celebration of narrative and igniting of imagination, as well as their ability to foster media remediation. Over twenty years ago, Gee (2003) envisioned video games being utilized for educational purposes, particularly for their ability to help the user establish connections among media (p. 1). Drawing upon field studies at his institution at the time, the University of Wisconsin, Gee explains that "we have watched seven-year-olds play *Age of Mythology*, read about mythology inside and outside the game on web sites, borrow books on mythology from the library, and draw pictures and write stories connected to the game and other mythological figures" (p. 2). Journet (2007) later uses Gee's work to connect game studies with composition studies, the latter of which "has increasingly emphasized...ways of enacting and communicating meaning within diverse worlds" (p. 93). *Myst* is a game that immerses the user in not just a virtual world but within a narrative structure, Journet argues, that mimics the active learning "valued in academic settings such as English class" (p. 93).

Myst has also been praised for its valuing of space, similar to the ways in which literature values setting. Ryan (2015) explores the concepts of “emotional space” and “strategic space” that construct video game narratives. Emotional space acts as an immersive worldbuilding feature: For example, Ryan notes that “building a space that reflects the virtual self’s identity is an essential part of the creative process” within the digital platform *Second Life* (p. 110). Strategic space, in contrast, is meant to guide the user through gameplay and denote boundaries, such as accomplished by the markings on a soccer field (p. 111). Like books, computer games contain spaces that “can be experienced both strategically *and* emotionally,” and Ryan highlights *Myst* as a game that draws the user in using both “objects that present possibilities of action” and a rich background “comparable to descriptions in a novel” (p. 116). *Myst* was so engaging that it sparked a *Myst Online* community that eventually migrated to *Second Life* upon its folding, where users recreated *Myst*’s environment in a fervent instance of remediation (p. 116). Similarly, Pearce (2008) hails *Myst* as one of the first games that “demanded that players develop the skills of ‘spatial literacy’” as a new narrative is constructed to extend the game’s existing mythology (p. 4). As *Myst* was “the first computer game to be considered a work of art,” it challenged the user to appreciate aesthetic surroundings while “reading” game space without an avatar. Understanding the functions of spaces in the game, reading texts, and making distinctions between background objects and affordances, Pearce argues, is how the user constructs broader meaning (p. 3).

Finally, scholars have credited *Myst* with remediating the book as a digital interface as well as remediating the film as an in-game vehicle for delivering backstory. In advocating for a “hybrid experience” between what she calls the “paperverse” and digital games, Bachmann (2023) notes that *Myst* remediates physical books in multiple ways, including “interfaces designed in book-like fashion,” “interludes that suggest that the stories they tell are read in a book,” and “books...depicted as objects in the narrative world” (p. 1). Majewski & Knight (2025) discuss *Myst* as part of a video game trend in the 1980s and 1990s to include interactive movies. Games like *Myst* “were positioned at the confluence of film and games, relying on both media formats,” and in turn spawned a trend of “filmmakers...augment[ing] their medium with game features” (p. 5). Indeed, *Myst* has a dense history of inspiring innovative ideas and reigniting a love of the physical world.

***Myst*’s Celebration of the Physical Book in a Digital World**

We love books. We relish their pages, spines, and old smells; we respond to their associations with solitude, coziness, and more specific sources of comfort like blankets and sleeping pets. Manufacturers like Out of Print Clothing sell us book covers on t-shirts and tote bags while donating to community literacy programs, while Storiarts prints portions of books on scarves as part of its partnership with the non-profit organization LitWorld. There is a clear market for those of us who want to advertise our bibliophile status.

Our affinity for books has also manifested in public memory, as demonstrated by the gigantic book-shaped fountain that sits in Budapest’s Egyetem Square (Hart, 2019). The book rests on its spine and covers while an arching spray of water mimics the turning of its pages. This fountain has captivated viewers outside of the Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences since 2012, reinforcing

the connection between books and institutions of learning and between books and knowledge more generally. The Budapest fountain inspired a similar installation in Istanbul's Gulhane Park, where visitors can read welcoming messages in both Turkish and English on the two open pages. And in other parts of the world like Xiamen, China, Cincinnati, Ohio, and Chattanooga, Tennessee, water pours over book sculptures outside of libraries and universities (Figure 1). The Amelia Valerio Weinburg Memorial Fountain, according to the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County's website, "features water cascading over a stack of ceramic tile books, representing the free flow of information and ideas through the printed word" ("Main Library Exhibits," n.d.).

Figure 1

The Amelia Valerio Weinburg Memorial Fountain. Reproduced on the "Main Library Exhibits" page of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County's website



Fountains all over the world stand as homages to the book's universally recognized image and its associations with knowledge, growth, and escapist pleasure. Modern installations like these are just one example of how, as Amaranth Borsuk describes, we hold on to stability in the midst of change. "As the material form of the codex threatens to disintegrate into the digital," Borsuk writes, "works highly attuned to materiality give us a chance to think about and savor the physical artifact, precisely by asking us to reflect on the very immaterial 'idea' of the book" (Borsuk, 2018, p. 146). In the case of the book fountains, installations are composed of both solid and liquid materials. This combination juxtaposes concrete, tactile features of the book with the change that occurs as we flip through its pages. The movement of water suggests the transmission and development of ideas, as does the text inscribed on the open pages. On a book sculpture in Bellflower, California, a page instructs readers to "Let your imagination soar" and proclaims that "Your adventure in the Enchanted Garden Begins" ("For the Bibliophiles", n.d.).

Myst's introductory monologue, which lasts just under a minute, also plays on the inherent magic of books. A writer has lost his *Myst* book through a "starry expanse," and due to his uncertainty of where the book has landed, realizes that "perhaps the ending has not yet been written" (Miller and Miller, 1993). The book "lands" on the bottom of the screen and glows with a gold shimmer, inviting the player to interact with it. A picture of *Myst* Island moves inside of the book's cover, and with one click, the player enters a living world among pages. And importantly, within that

living world are even *more* pages. “By far the most promising objects [in *Myst*],” Steven Jones writes, “turn out to be the enigmatic, backlit, fetishistic, leatherbound books that are everywhere you turn in this landscape” (Jones, 1997, p. 3). Whenever the player clicks on a book, it magically slides toward the front of the screen and opens (Figure 2). SIRRUS and Achenar, the two sons of Atrus, even compel the player from “magic videos” in their respective books (p. 3).

Figure 2

A Myst linking book, which showcases the library’s ceiling. Reproduced from GiantBomb.com



Myst features physical books prominently during gameplay while elevating them in the player’s mind to a superior, coveted status. There are a variety of places to explore on *Myst* Island, but its center is purposely marked by a library that the player must enter to receive further direction. Unlike *Myst* Island’s natural outdoor areas, mysterious objects (like the gear protruding from the top of a hill), and abandoned-looking artifacts (like the sunken ship), its library is a familiar and comforting presence. Upon entering the library, the player finds rich maple furnishings, built-in bookshelves, pillars, and wall art. These items suggest opulence and distinction, reflecting a traditional view of libraries as quiet sanctuaries. The built-in shelves are full of books that the player can pick up and flip through, and whether they read them or not, the text is perfectly legible. Each book describes different elements of *Myst* Island and surrounding worlds and includes drawings and diagrams of significant places. On another wall, a 3D map alerts the player to the geography of the island and even invites them to rotate the library’s tower by pressing its image.

Figure 3

Interior of Myst Library. Reproduced from LFGryph personal blog



This library is both the literal and symbolic center of Myst Island (Figure 3). Everyone must visit it to navigate the rest of this strange new environment, just as we access libraries and databases to learn more about our own world. In his essay “The Book of Myst in the Late Age of Print,” Steven Jones adds that the library is the game’s final reward after completing the mission because “the user is returned to the Library, set free to browse or ‘explore’ the island and its connected ages” without having to solve any further puzzles (p. 2). In the way that we fetishize physical books like the leatherbound tomes in *Myst*’s library, so we are invited to fetishize the library itself. Our ultimate reward is a leisurely stroll through the ages, and our only mission is to go wherever our imagination takes us.

The Creative Potential of Remediation

Alarm bells tend to ring whenever a new form of media gains popularity. But according to media scholar Henry Jenkins, these fears are generally overblown. “Printed words did not kill spoken words. Cinema did not kill theater,” Jenkins writes in *Convergence Culture*. “Old media are not being displaced. Rather their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 14). This process of new media comingling with old media is what Jay David Botler and Richard Grusin call *remediation*, an inevitable but not necessarily negative part of technological advancement:

In this last decade of the twentieth century...[o]lder electronic and print media are seeking to reaffirm their status within our culture as digital media challenge that status. Both new and old media are involving the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their efforts

to remake themselves and each other...the logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in the race car or standing on a mountaintop. (Botler and Grusin, 1998, p. 5-6)

Botler and Grusin capture the fear of replacement that underlies new media anxieties. We bemoan e-books, for example, because we are afraid that they will ultimately replace our familiar, dog-eared printed copies. Likewise, if we can experience a completely imagined world via a CD-ROM, what good is literary fiction? This “either/or” brand of thinking is outdated according to the theory of remediation, which envisions old and new media as co-existing and informing one another.

Robyn Miller suspects that *Myst*'s “practically invisible interface” is the reason “why [it] was able to attract a non-gamer audience,” and even admits to not being a gamer himself until he developed *Myst* (Douglas, 2012). A few years after *Myst*'s release, Robyn and his brother Rand expanded the universe through another medium that would also appeal to non-gamers: the novel. *The Book of Atrus* (1995), *The Book of Ti'ana* (1996), and *The Book of D'ni* (1997) were immediately embraced by fans and eventually re-released in a collection called *The Myst Reader* (2004). Steven Jones describes the design features of the game's print prequel, *The Book of Atrus*, emphasizing its particular details that invoke our nostalgia for physical books:

Its glossy boards are covered in photo-faux leather, complete with ‘water stains,’ ‘scratches,’ and raised and textured ‘gilt’ corners, and its main title is represented as ‘stamped’ or ‘burned’ into the cover...Inside, the pages are artificially yellowed, the illustrations deliberately primitive pencil or charcoal sketches from the protagonist's notebook. Clearly, this is a book that means to be a Book—and in as many ways as graphically possible (p. 6).

By developing print novels, the creators of *Myst* have done much more than pay homage to the physical book. They have spawned old media from new: three physical books from a digital world. “[T]he Cyan design team has self-consciously and literally inscribed a book at the ‘origin’ of their ‘non-linear’ hypernarrative,” Jones writes. “The hardcover prequel that developed from the game itself is thereby figured as the organic ‘trunk,’ the origin from which the multilinear branches of any user's game-play must grow” (p. 7). By creating a print book to chronologically precede the game, Rand and Robyn Miller have anchored their virtual reality to tangible objects. And in a fitting parallel to the *Myst* ages' various stages of technological development, they have demonstrated how media itself evolves over time.

Released in 2013, *S.* similarly honors the book with a nod to physicality and remediation. Science fiction mastermind J.J. Abrams and writer Doug Dorst announced their collaborative project via two online trailers that initially suggest a film or a TV series: the kind of media that audiences have come to expect from anything with Abrams' stamp. By the end of the first trailer, the viewer is introduced to not another *Lost* or *Fringe*, but a novel. The trailer concludes with the reveal of *S.*'s physicality as a voice announces, “The book is just the beginning.” The final thing that the viewer sees is a website, www.soonyouwillknow.com, which invites them to learn more. In their essay “‘Book for Loan’: *S.* as Paradox of Media Change,” Emma de Vries and Yra van Dijk describe *S.* as a “visually spectacular book” meant to be paired with “digital paratexts,” that

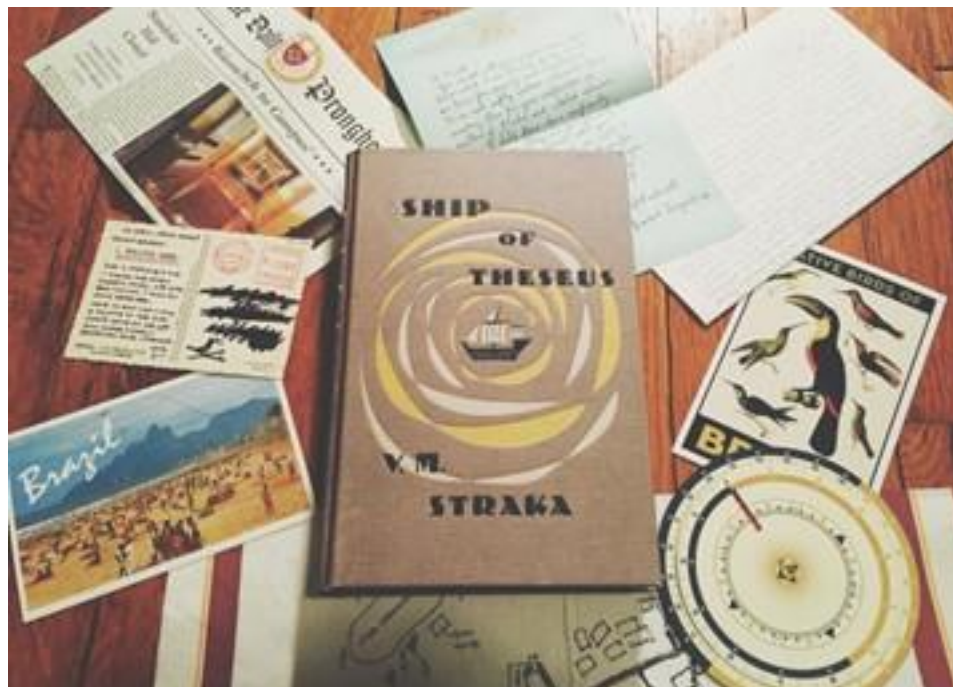
“function together as a philosophical paradox about the future of the book” (de Vries and van Dijk, 2018, p. 132). As the piano music plays and the clicking of the typewriter persists, old and new media inform each other – and inform us as well.

The essence of *S.* is a polished black slipcover that contains a library book with a call number on its distressed spine and dates stamped inside its back cover. The novel, *Ship of Theseus*, contains the main plot by fictional author V.M. Straka, a subplot driven by the marginalia of Jen and Eric, (two students reading the novel), footnotes from a mysterious translator, and various ephemera tucked between its pages. Dorst refers to *S.* as “an infinite sandbox of joy and fun,” as readers are immersed in multiple alternate realities simultaneously (Rothman, 2013).

What Doug Dorst calls “the intimacies of books” drove the initial concept of *S.* Despite being a mass-produced object, *S.* feels intensely personal thanks to the abundance of handwritten (and often imperfect) margin notes, references to events and situations on the fictional campus of Pollard State University, and inserts like coffee shop napkins and college newsletters (Figure 4). Some ephemera, like Jen’s handwritten letters to Eric, are of such a secret nature that readers feel privy to characters’ innermost thoughts. These design elements are a deliberate part of *S.*’s intention “to be a celebration of the analog, of the physical object,” according to Abrams. “We wanted to include things you can actually hold in your hand,” he explains. “In this moment of e-mails, and texting, and everything moving into the cloud, in an intangible way, it’s intentionally tangible” (Rothman, 2013).

Figure 4

A copy of Ship of Theseus and some of its supplemental materials. Reproduced from Ingbrit.com



S. celebrates the book by adopting its most traditional form – the physical copy – while *Myst* is a computer game that unfolds on a screen. The game’s electronic format prompted *Myst* to make up for its lack of physicality or “bookness” with supplementary physical materials like the *Myst* novels and print strategy guide. *S.* mixes media, in contrast, by supplementing its tangible center with online resources. Readers can read Jen and Eric’s Twitter (now X) posts at @JentheUndergrad and @EricHusch as well as clarify the novel’s intricacies via a Fandom.com Wiki site (Heyward, n.d.; Husch, n.d.; Ship of Theseus Wiki, n.d.). As different media formats intertwine, their remediation prompts us to think about the aspects of the book that are not static, but ephemeral and even ethereal.

Ephemerality in *Myst* and *S.*

Book sculptures like the fountain in Budapest play on our nostalgia for libraries and musty old volumes. But perhaps more discreetly, they also hint at the book’s ephemeral qualities. While a coffee table book is heavy, dimensional, and rests on a surface unless physically moved, its content moves and inspires readers in drastically different ways. At the same time, while the text of classics like William Faulker’s *The Sound and the Fury* or Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* remains unchanged, design updates and digitization allow more readers to access that text. Change, whether we consciously realize it or not, is built into the very concept of the physical book.

For all the homage they pay to the physical book, *Myst* and *S.* also praise its more malleable and ephemeral elements. In other words, these creations value books not just for what they are, but for what they can be and do. The entire gameplay of *Myst* hinges upon what are called linking books, which exist in contrast to the stationary books (without magical properties) that populate the library’s shelves. *Myst* Island contains portals to four distinct worlds or “ages” – Channelwood, Mechanical, Selenitic, and Stoneship – in the form of books with moving images of the world inside them. The player is transported to a different world once they place their hand on the moving image and hear a warping sound effect before the scenery changes. There is no avatar for the game’s narrator, meaning that the player navigates various worlds and puzzles via an immersive first-person lens.

Like the narrator, the other characters in the game are disembodied. SIRRUS and Achenar, the two brothers who are each trapped in one of the library’s books, are ephemeral in that they almost never materialize outside of their prisons during gameplay. And as the player completes missions and dutifully brings pages back to either SIRRUS or Achenar, the player is likewise alerted to the ephemerality of the brothers’ messages. Pre-recorded videos, characterized by heavy static that disrupts the messages’ transmission, crackle and shift inside of stable, physical library books. Each time the player returns with a new page, the static lessens, a new message is transmitted, and the mood of the brother alters considerably.

This combination of old and new technology, stable and malleable media, imitates the inherent contradictions of *Myst*’s ages. “Technological regimes are mixed promiscuously: a streamlined 1920s rocketship...is docked on the shore near trees and an electrical tower with a larger breaker switch, for example, and a hydraulic elevator takes one up inside a giant pine tree,” notes Steven

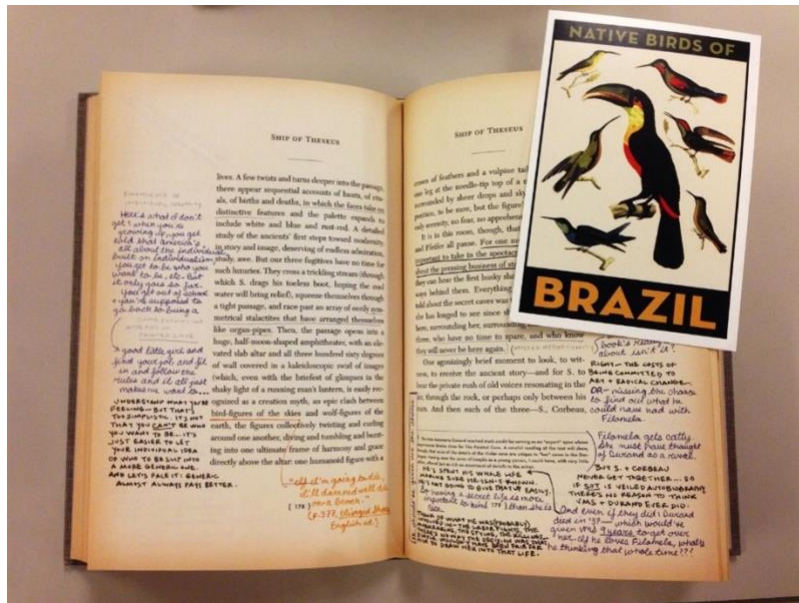
Jones. “The connection between ‘making progress’ toward the endgame and the theme of technological progress through a series of successive ‘ages’ is hard to simply dismiss” (p. 12). Provided that the player has done everything correctly (more on the consequences of choosing incorrectly later), the endgame rewards them with a comfort and stasis similar to that of *Myst*’s central library. They travel to the world of D’ni to meet Atrus: father of Sirrus and Achenar, author of the various linking books on Myst Island, and the game’s only face-to-face social interaction. After completing puzzles with only ephemeral clues to guide them (fleeting sounds in an underground maze; vanishing tiles on the back of a fireplace), the player is able to spend time with an actual person and then free him from his prison.

S. may be recognized for its physicality, but instability and ephemerality also heavily inform the project. The premise of the Ship of Theseus destabilizes identity and calls permanence into question. If a ship’s parts are removed and replaced, one by one, is it ultimately the same ship that it was before? Both the novel’s plot and the story behind the fictional author V.M. Straka mirror this paradox. *S.* is a man with no recollection of his past while V.M. Straka is an author without an identity, an enigma to frustrated but endlessly intrigued literature majors and faculty at Pollard State University. Eric and Jen’s correspondence in the novel’s margins and on various inserts further complicate questions of identity, truth, and fiction.

Other than the marginalia dialogue that often refers to itself as Jen and Eric read through the novel multiple times, one of the best examples of ephemerality in *S.* comes from Jen’s two handwritten letters. The first, tucked between pages 100-101, tells the story of Jen’s disappearance as a seven year old child. The letter itself is a mix of certainty (“I remember trying not to breathe”) and unreliability (“I’m not sure which parts of this I really was told + which parts I’ve filled in or made up”) as Jen wrestles with her parents’ divorce, her own disappearance, and the reaction of the town that molded her into “this Jenny-In-Danger version of me” (Abrams and Dorst, 2013, pp. 100-101). After reading Jen’s letter, Eric expresses his interest and sympathy in the margins. The two characters find commonality in having tenuous relationships with their parents, which moves their relationship with each other forward. But nearly three hundred pages later, Jen revises her entire story in a second letter. She admits to lying to Eric and also lying to the child she met on the day of her disappearance, writing that “it was (and is) unnerving to me, how easily I could shape myself into something else. If you can become anything, then you aren’t anything. Right?” (pp. 376-377). Eric is predictably angry, as he believed Jen’s fabricated version for quite a while. One story has suddenly vanished as if it never existed and has been replaced with another.

Figure 5

Marginalia and a postcard in S. Reproduced from Marvin Joseph, Washington Post photographer



To further complicate matters, the novel’s marginalia document a relationship that – like the relationships among *Myst*’s few characters – is without physical interaction (Figure 5). Eric and Jen exchange notes throughout the bulk of the novel by dropping off and picking up *Ship of Theseus* from the library. They fall in love with one another by way of their words, similar to a modern romance that develops through text messages or the internet. “*S.* is not just about the future of the book, but also about the question of how our culture and identity depend on the book,” Emma de Vries and Yra van Dijk write. “*S.* seems to be another reminder of the impossibility of cutting loose both reading and meaning-making from their social and material context (p. 129). As Jen and Eric write in the empty parts of *Ship of Theseus*’ pages, they simultaneously change and are changed by the book. Additions like these “draw the reader’s attention to alternative texts,” Amaranth Borsuk writes, functioning as “a generative impulse...that reveals the potentiality inherent in any text” (Borsuk, 2018, p. 187). By the end of the novel, Jen and Eric’s potentiality has solidified into a physical, tangible relationship. Similar to the ending of *Myst*, the reader is left with the satisfaction of knowing that the two characters are finally in the same room when Jen scribbles, “Hey, put the book down. Come in here + stay” (Abrams and Dorst, 2013, p. 457).

Worldbuilding; Worldblurring

Anna Quindlen once wrote that books “are the plane, and the train, and the road...the destination, and the journey.” Stephen King has described them as a “uniquely portable magic.” Though the traditional book is a physical object, it has long been viewed as otherworldly because of its ability to transport and transform. Amaranth Borsuk explores this idea of books as worlds unto

themselves, along with the view of books as a comparatively stimulating and intellectual form of media, in *The Book*:

Whether the volume in question is a travel guide or a romance novel, the perception that books are little worlds enclosed in covers remains the same. We think of ourselves as disappearing into them, only to emerge hours later, changed by what we have read. Pundits frequently draw on this romance of disembodiment as a contrast to the passivity of watching television... Even in this vanguard moment of complex televised dramas, the stigma remains: We would be better people if we disappeared into books instead. (pp. 84-86)

Myst creator Robyn Miller drew on the notion of books as “little worlds” while building the game. “When we made *Myst*, it was a way of exploring a world,” he tells *Digital Trends*. “That really hadn’t existed for us [as gamers] to do, to explore worlds” (Rosenburg, 2013). Miller cites *The Legend of Zelda* and *Dungeons and Dragons* as major inspirations for *Myst*, as both games focused on the importance in gameplay of narrative, plot, and elaborately constructed other worlds. Most of *Myst*’s puzzles can be completed in a non-linear sequence, but they are still pieces of one cohesive plot driven by a nameless, faceless, “everyman” narrator. Robyn Miller maintains that he wanted players to feel deeply connected to the story. “It was just through an intuitive sense that we wanted to make this a more believable place,” he explains. “I think that if it feels less like a puzzle, people tend to enjoy it more. It doesn’t feel like a game anymore. It just feels like you’re in this world and you have a problem to solve” (Rosenburg, 2013).

Figure 6

Sirrus trapped in the red book. Reproduced from Tales From the Cat Ranch personal blog



Though there is an element of freedom in *Myst*’s worlds, the game also explores a different kind of immersion: the book as imprisonment. Sirrus and Achenar have no mobility in the game and beg for “linking pages” from other worlds so that they can be free (Figure 6). The implication is

that someone *put* SIRRUS and ACHENAR into these books, and this is clarified when players speak with ATRUS. “I wrote many books that linked me to fantastic places,” ATRUS says, “but the red and blue books... those were to trap overgreedy explorers” (Miller and Miller, 1993). He explains that his sons ended up in the books despite his many warnings not to go near them. “I gave them free rein to the books; perhaps it was not wise,” he admits. “I could see the greed growing in them... Their imaginations went wild; they dreamed of riches and powers.” Books in this context are cautionary tales, and symbolize the use of knowledge for good or for evil. Knowledge can build worlds and create opportunities, but with the wrong intentions, it can also cause destruction and pain.

At a pivotal point in the game when the player must decide whom to trust (SIRRUS, ACHENAR, or neither), they risk becoming so immersed in *Myst* that they exchange their own freedom for captivity. If the player brings all red pages to SIRRUS, for example, they hear the same whirring noise that marks transition between worlds. An image of the library’s domed roof appears, hazily, as if the player is opening their eyes. SIRRUS materializes and laughs, “I’m free! Thank you, my *friend*” (Miller and Miller, 1993). After a few taunts, he proceeds to rip out pages from the book until the player is left with a screen full of static. The game ends with the player trapped in the same book they held in their hands a few minutes earlier, confined within the same world they were once free to explore. (For those curious, I trusted SIRRUS while my mom trusted ACHENAR. We played through the game both ways, and the result was, devastatingly, the same.)

S. similarly uses a mix of old and new media to shape worlds and to blur the lines between them. While the book’s central metaphor pertains to both the plot of *Ship of Theseus* and its fictional author’s life, the metaphor also speaks to the transmedia composition of *S.* With its core physical elements, online trailers, Twitter/X accounts, and “original” ending posted on Jen Heyward’s fictional Tumblr page, *S.* “functions as a philosophical paradox: it is both a book and not a book at the same time” (de Vries and van Dijk, 2018, p. 129):

Analogous to the ship that “again and again... sheds a feature and dons a new one, reinterpreted and remade” (*S.*, 291), project *S.* presents a text that is in a permanent state of alteration. These alterations can imply an extension, when elements are added through its alternative endings, additions in the margins, foreword, footnotes, be it on paper, be it in the digital ambits of this transmedia project. Yet at the same time, the alterations can imply a loss. Like *S.*’s ship, which continuously loses parts, the inserts in book-box *S.* expose the object to amputation and change: these can easily get lost, or displaced. (p. 131)

After reading *S.* multiple times, I have to disagree with Emma de Vries and Yra van Dijk’s (2018) assertion that the book’s supplements “can imply a loss.” Supplements can certainly fall out and be misplaced, but this characteristic lends itself to the reader being more immersed in the book overall, not less. I located the key for where each supplement belongs in case any of them slipped out during my initial read through. While balancing the book on my exercise bike in a desperate effort to multitask, I was particularly careful not to let anything drop to the floor. *S.*’s transmedia format instilled a hyperawareness in me of the book’s many parts, which contributed to *S.*’s worldbuilding capability. And if the book’s inserts are truly lost, *S.*’s virtual elements make it possible for the reader to download or view the missing information. The net result is that *S.*’s

alterations and supplements “extend” the physical book while consequently extending its worldbuilding potential. Our investment in the *Ship of Theseus* story is compounded by that of Jen and Eric: we root for Jen and Eric to solve the mystery of V.M. Straka’s and F.X. Caldeira’s identities, beat Eric’s thieving former advisor at his own game, and ultimately to fall in love in the “real world.” And our investment in Jen and Eric is compounded by our identification with them: Jen and Eric love books, and lose themselves in books, just as we do as readers. Jen, for instance, tells Eric on *Ship of Theseus*’ first page that she “read the rest in one sitting – wow. Haven’t liked a book so much in a long time... I really needed an escape, I think.” Eric, in a bit of foreshadowing, responds, “If you thought it was an ‘escape,’ then you weren’t reading closely enough” (Abrams and Dorst, 2013, p. 1). The physical book, just like in *Myst*, is established as paradoxically escape and confinement; as freedom and imprisonment. Later as Jen begins to lose herself in the riddle of Straka himself, she shares with Eric that “My friends are actively ignoring me now. Realized I don’t care AT ALL” (p. 17).

The supplements also expand V.M. Straka’s history and serve as important benchmarks in Jen and Eric’s relationship. For example, the book’s postcards are included to document the time Eric spent away from the physical PSU library and on the hunt for F.X. Caldeira. He masks his identity and purpose by pretending to address a group of fellow birdwatchers, and even suggests that it’s “best to destroy this + the cards to follow.” This line from the post-script, which ends with “but I hope you keep it + think of me,” maintain the reader’s investment in both the mystery (feeling aware of private information) and in Jen and Eric’s developing tryst (watching Eric betray his professional exterior and hint at his interest in Jen). In the reader’s hand, the postcards feel like precious mementos. As they reveal Eric’s excitement about meeting F.X. Caldeira and sharing the experience with Jen, the postcards link his world to hers and our world to theirs. “I wish you were here,” he writes on the postcard between pages 192 and 193, “though in a way, you are.”

***Myst*’s Influence on Contemporary Culture**

As digital and analog forms of media bleed into one another, we may fear the possible replacement of physical life with virtual reality. This echoes my parents’ directions for me not to spend too much time playing computer games, lest I lose interest in more physical or social activities. But regardless of vivid graphics or seamless interfaces, highly immersive games like *Myst* have not destroyed our ability to interact with the world. They have inspired new ways to engage with it. This is because, as Élika Ortega writes in her essay “Media and Cultural Hybridity in the Digital Humanities,” “new-media developments not only affect what comes after them, they also reframe what came before” (Ortega, 2020, p. 160). Rather than disappearing, older, more traditional forms of media are reframed and sometimes even generated from newer ones. This was certainly the case with *Myst*’s novels as well as books available within games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and the *Fallout* series.

Scott Nicholson, who directs Wilfrid Laurier University’s Game Design and Development program, links the current escape room phenomenon to Ortega’s notion of media and cultural hybridity. Along with interactive theater and adventure game shows, Nicholson (2016) argues, “point-and-click adventure games” and live action role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*

(that directly influenced *Myst*'s development) led many escape room owners to get into the business. Some survey respondents even specifically named the game as an inspiration, calling escape rooms "live-action *Myst*." More tangibly, escape room designers rely on interactive computer game concepts to improve users' experiences. "In poorly designed rooms, many red herring items exist to 'dress the set' but end up confusing and frustrating players," Nicholson explains. "It is important that escape room designers either have information available...or a feedback mechanism to let players know they are on the right track" (Nicholson, 2016). In *Myst*, for instance, various sensory cues direct players toward items of significance. Sounds like the redwood tree elevator moving in the distance or the warping of the library's painting when touched alert players to new affordances, and the transformation of the cursor to a gripping hand informs them that an item can be picked up. Cues like these can be utilized to make real life escape rooms more enjoyable. After all, the thrill of escape rooms is feeling one step closer to solving a mystery.

Geocaching is another popular adventure game that can be played with friends and invites players to find hidden treasures around the world using GPS technology. According to Geocaching.com, the game has been around since 2000 and has since grown from the first hidden item near Beavercreek, Oregon to over 3.3 million hidden items in 191 countries and all seven continents ("Fast Facts", 2025). Like *Myst*, Geocaching's appeal is rooted in exploring new environments, searching for clues, and obtaining items of interest. Many users who frequent the official forums cite *Myst* as an inspiration, and exchange tips on how to create Geocaches that pay tribute to the computer game ("Myst style Geocaches," 2002).

And of course, other virtual reality platforms have spawned tangible media and experiences. *Second Life*, a creation of Linden Lab, launched in 2003 and remains "the largest and longest-running virtual world" (Bucknell, 2024). The platform is distinguished from computer games like *Myst*, however, in that its content is created by the users themselves. Some of this content is so popular that it links to real-world places or generates real-world versions of itself. *Second Life* libraries, for example, connect to actual public libraries or college learning facilities. Users can access *Second Life* content supported by their local library and even attend conferences by way of the *Second Life* platform (Baity et al., n.d., p. 10; Bell, 2008). For those looking for something a bit lighter, "games in Second Life are very popular," *NBC News*' Kristin Kalning (2007) explains. "Tringo, a fast-paced fusion of Tetris and bingo, did so well in-world that it was turned into a Game Boy Advance game in the real world" (Kalning, 2007). Like *Myst*, *Second Life* has also spawned a novel. *Anima: A Novel about Second Life* tells the story of Ben Tao, the avatar of a man who hacks *Second Life* and inadvertently opens up a wormhole that connects his online misdeeds with the real world (Hansen, 2007). Here, virtual reality and physical reality meet both on and off the page.

Conclusion

My initial experience with *S*. blurred the lines between fiction and reality in a startling way. I purchased a used copy online and as I read, noticed some penciled notes in the marginalia that didn't seem to reflect either Jen or Eric's handwriting. On the day that my class discussed the books, I did a quick internet search for images of the pages in question and checked my copy against the other students'. As it turns out, my book's previous owner had added their own

markings to the mass-produced ephemera. My world had collided with that of *S.* to such an extent that it took accessing a digital medium and collaborating with other readers to decipher what was what. As I reflect on this now, I remember the string of questions Emma de Vries and Yra van Dijk asked in “Book for Loan.” “What hinges on the continuity of the ship? And, by extension, what hinges on the continuity of the book? Why do these questions matter at all?” (de Vries and van Dijk, 2018, p. 133).

Anxieties over excessive time with digital media are not without warrant. A study by the American Psychological Association recently found that excessive screen time, particularly for gaming, can lead to socioemotional problems in children (Vasconcellos et al., 2025, p. 513). The National Institutes of Health, noting excessive screen time’s impact on cognitive process and language development, recommends “setting boundaries” and “demonstrating good screen behavior” (Muppalla et al., 2023). However, *Myst* defies the stereotype of the “zombified” computer user by reigniting our excitement about the real world. It does not kill our interest in the physical book, but honors it with an exploratory new platform. It paves the way for new means of physical and social entertainment. It is a celebration of the analog, like J.J. Abrams’ and Doug Dorst’s *S.*, reminding us how pleasurable it is to explore worlds both old and new.

When Bruce Sterling writes that “tomorrow composts today,” I believe that he echoes Atrus’ famous observation about the uncertainty of the future (Sterling, 2005). As the number of independent bookstores rises along with our use of e-readers, we cannot say that video will kill the radio star or that gaming will replace adventures in literature (Hirsch, 2018). We only know that *the ending has not yet been written.*

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