

Learning to Read, Again

David Kolb Winter 2020

1. Beginnings

I don't remember learning to read. As far as I can recall I was always reading books. I found out later that there were disputes about phonics versus other methods, but I have no memory of whatever method my parents and I used to learn to read.



Before we learned to read we learned to listen and speak. We learned to distinguish patterns of sounds and build them up into complex sequences correlated to more complex meanings. When we learned to read we relied on our ability to recognize repeating sound units, correlating them with series of marks on paper. The fights about methods for teaching reading often were over whether it was better to start with middle sized, words and sentences, or with smallest units, letters and individual sounds.

Since I'll be talking about learning to "read" more than words, I've picked "media objects" as a general term over written and printed texts, films, pieces of music, games and virtual reality worlds, and so on.

I came to grammar school already capable of reading and bored by what we were asked to do, so I frequented the local library. The librarians would stage contests over the summer. I did well and one of the prizes was a science-fiction book which got me started on a lifelong interest, or addiction. But I

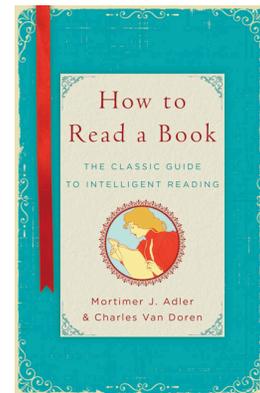


read a lot more than that; one of the first things I learned was to distinguish "serious" reading from "fun" reading. There wasn't much call in grammar

school for library research but when I got to high school that became more important. Probably the first time I realized there was another kind of reading, "serious literature," was in a high school English class where I reported on Thomas Wolfe's long novels. Excited, I wrote an unreasonably long paper which my patient mother typed out for me.



High school teachers gave us pointers on how to read. I was influenced by a Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* (later updated by Adler and van Doren). Overly detailed but very earnest, the guide prescribes different approaches to different kinds of books, all emphasizing what it calls "active reading." You scan to decide whether the book is worth reading, then go a bit deeper, and then deeper still, looking at prefaces, tables of contents, indices, and acknowledgments to get a sense of the world in which the book was written, its intended audience and what the author takes to be its purpose. You decide whether or not to invest more time in the book. You come to the book with expectations that get more detailed as you make ever deeper passes through it.

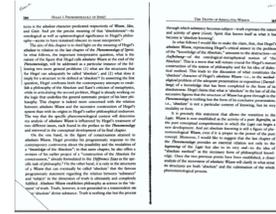


For imaginative literature (novels, plays, poetry), Adler urges another kind of active reading. Active openness to the experience the author is providing, letting yourself be influenced, sinking into the story, its metaphors and the language, actively holding off judgment and analysis until you've lived it through. For all kinds of reading his point is that we should be actively receptive.

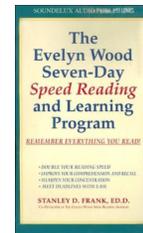
I learned another active reading skill: marking up books. It really helps when you go back to a book, even though scribbled



notes from one era may not be legible five years later. Sideline to emphasize paragraphs or sentences works better than underlining or yellow markers, which clutter the pages. I circle key words and put a check mark on the corner of important pages. (You might think think e-books are impossible to mark up but there are ways to do it.)



My high school also pushed speed reading. You may recall Evelyn Woods Reading Dynamics — people waving their hands over the page to guide the their eyes quickly. I never found it helpful.



In fact the opposite was better. Once I started studying math and Latin and Greek I had to slow down my reading. Stop and piece apart an equation, or one of Cicero's complicated sentences, or a mysterious Greek verb form.



So by the end of high school I had learned skills that enabled me to read both very quickly and very slowly.

And I had learned the tools that went along with books: yellow pads, typewriters, notebooks, Readers Digest, book reviews, and so on. For we do not read alone; we read amid a shared network of practices, tools, conventions.



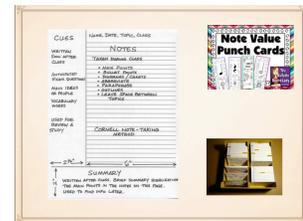
In college I was initiated me into the mysteries of the card catalog and the depths of the periodical room with its specialized printed guides. Then thesauruses, concordances, critical editions, which were amazing products of detailed scholarship... then learning to plan and revise long writings, then running the publication race... I had a repertory of skills for dealing with paper and text for research and writing .



There were new tools, as well, structured notepaper, file boxes, and those odd note cards with punched holes along the edges.



At this point you might object that while it's been interesting to learn how DK was initiated into academic reading, isn't that a rather specialized history? But I picked my own case because the focus on words and print makes various stages of learning to navigate a media world easily identifiable. All of us have gone through those stages. We had to learn how to identify the elements in a set of symbols and pair them up with sound and meaning. We had to learn how to combine a sequence of those symbols – words or images – into the larger meanings of a sentence or the plot of a story. We had to learn to distinguish factual reports, arguments, story, different kinds of movies, and programs and games. In doing so we built up rough and ready maps about the kind of objects in our media world, which ones were easily accessible which ones were not, and where we would go if we wanted to encounter different ones on various scales of difficulty and accessibility. We developed a sense of the relative stability of those kinds of media objects and we knew things were waiting for us to explore.



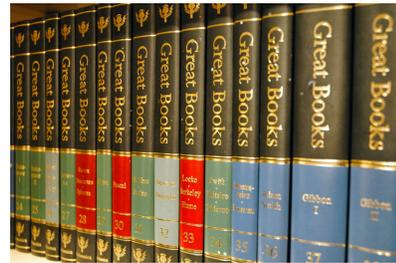
2. The Old World

For you and I had not just learned our specific skills. There was a worldview, an economy, what literary critics call an imaginary, into which we had been inducted. It presented the universe of reading and writing as a series of ever deepening libraries —



the town library, the College library, then specialized research libraries... Eventually with the aid of fellowships I ascended to heaven, with six-month cards for the Widener library at Harvard, and visits to research libraries in Europe.

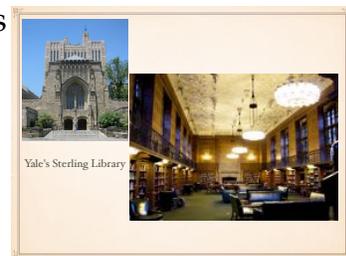
Those libraries housed the Great Books, the classic stars that one could steer by, surrounded by clouds of commentaries and analyses. Maintaining this canon demanded gatekeepers who judged what belonged on what level, inducting us into the mysteries and the higher mysteries. Or rejecting our contributions as unworthy.



There were controversies on the edge of this world as to whether whole fields or various authors had been unfairly left out, as well as questions about the reliability of this or that gatekeeper. Such disputes still go on. But now the whole picture has been challenged more deeply than by such small fights.



Another presupposition of this world was that texts stayed solid and unchanging once they were stored, and that there were trustworthy procedures for locating them. At graduate school, Yale's Sterling library put me in the Oxford / Cambridge / Medieval atmosphere of leisured aristocrats discussing books together. On the other hand when I taught at the University of Chicago, its Regenstein Library had the air of a modern corporation where individuals labored in research cubicles producing knowledge. Very different, but in both cases the texts waited passively



there in the big libraries.

While quantity was always an issue, there were reliable guides, and the overall map seemed secure.

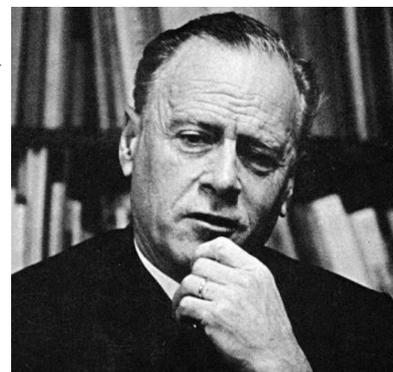
Of course I've been oversimplifying; the age of print was not so unified, there had been many different economies over time, different technologies and the constant invention of new genres of writing especially in the Middle Ages and in the period between when printing arrived in Europe and when book markets and academic scholarship settled down in the 19th century. Many stories could be told about those changes.

3. The Deluge

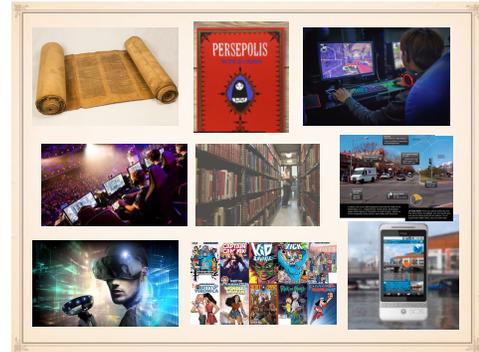
When I moved to Bates College in Maine in the late 70s, the computer revolution was just beginning. I rented a standalone word processing device the size of a small refrigerator from Digital Equipment Corporation and used it to begin a book. A few years later I bought my first computer. The fledgling Internet was gradually coming up and everything I knew about reading, research, and paper was about to be challenged.

At first I didn't notice how much was changing — as Marshall McLuhan said we always drive into the country of new media with our eye on the rear view mirror, seeing the new as just a variant of the old...until we are forced to realize the country around us is no longer the hills we knew.

The first weird thing that there was more to read. Not just more stuff but new kinds of stuff. Books, ebooks, blogs, email, social media, podcasts,

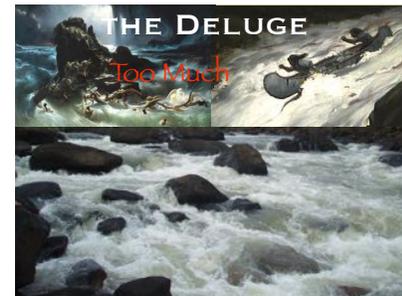


comic books and graphic novels, music videos, new kinds of collage, web "pages" that are not pages at all but new kinds of spaces bringing video images, audio, and text together in spatial arrangements that may or may not be of significance. New kinds of objects required new reading skills.

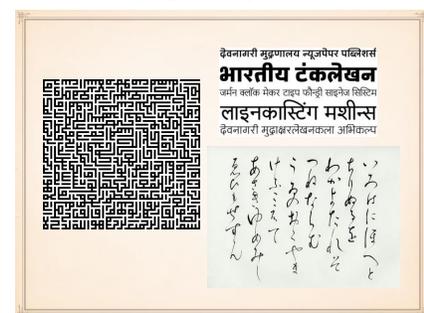


The deluge of new media swept away the old familiar roads, flooding over the walls and floating the monuments away. New forms defy received hierarchies:

For instance, is the 2019 film adaptation of Alcott's *Little Women* to be measured by its faithfulness to an unchanging original? Or does its overlapping story and meta-story of Alcott's life move that original into a more complex context, confronting two worlds for a richer reading? New media objects require new ways to read.



Part of what makes our new media objects confusing is that with comic books or new kinds of music or blogs or VR we find ourselves back to square one -- not quite sure what the basic parts are, how they go together, what counts is a good or bad example, and where we would go to find more subtle or enlightened examples. It's like learning to read in a foreign language with a new culture and different mode of writing.



Reading as we learned it dealt with words on page. The old library had expanded to include painted images, music and

film. But now words were combining with images in new ways. Comic books and graphic novels were pushing in. Words were leaping off the page onto screens. This seemed at first just a paper substitute, but once freed from the page words could mutate, move around, be shared in new ways, mating with images and music. Whole new families of media objects were birthed. Including syntheses of all this in games, operas, podcasts, digital works.

Words take on new roles as they step beyond the page to live on the screen — and then they move onto shared screens — and then into games, — and then into immersive media : augmented and virtual reality — and who knows what will come after.

That most early examples are not subtle or of great quality says little. A newly invented musical instrument takes time for creators to explore and extend its possibilities. We were left gasping amid this world of new media objects.

The library has expanded beyond any easy overview and contains new objects. The parade of great books is still there but it faces rival lists and gets diluted by needed additions. The library itself is no longer stable — you no longer are sure what you're reading is what you think it is. There used to be a structured overview available to the privileged few. Now even Google with its eyes everywhere only produces a list.

Even more, these strange new media objects are not passive words on pages stashed in a distant library. They crowd around you, demanding attention, and they might be influencing you even though you say you aren't paying attention. They are coming at you



incessantly, right into your eyes and ears every hour.

Media and knowledge have gone from an economy of scarcity where information and insight had to be laboriously manufactured, to where information floods you on all sides and links offer themselves.

Now you might object: “Look”, you say, “the *New Yorker* is still publishing fiction and investigative reporting and poetry, little literary magazines continue to be produced, the *Review of Philosophy* and other prestige academic journals are still coming out regularly, as is *Nature* and all the journals in physics and the other sciences. The best newspapers still produce good reporting. Sure there is a lot of fluff and crap being produced but the core of true intellectual endeavor and artistic originality remains firm. Our task is not to examine the endless production of fluff but to concentrate on strengthening that core.”



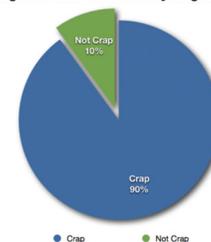
I think that objection is mistaken. Although it is true that the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* go on as before, their environment has changed. The appearance of continuity is misleading. Newspapers are dying by the day and Condé Nast is getting rid of almost all its magazines. And while prestigious academic journals continue to be published, in fact scientific and philosophical communication more and more uses informal communication, blogs and online archives and tiny circulation specialized journals. Open access journals rival the expensive big names. Printed journals become historical records of the most approved items, not the place where we first encounter new research.

The academic mechanisms of tenure and promotion, the juries of literary prizes, and prestigious reviewers have not yet caught up with where the action really is. There's more creativity and bustling innovation in what's

was just being dismissed as fluff. Take music as an example, or painting, where the distinction of pop from serious is falling apart as younger artists begin to combine both sides.

This is not to question Sturgeon's Law (“ninety percent of everything is crap”). Filters and guides remain necessary. But you can't just sit back and let the old fashioned media inform you. For new forms are being created in new media productions all around.

Sturgeon's Law: "90% of everything is crap"



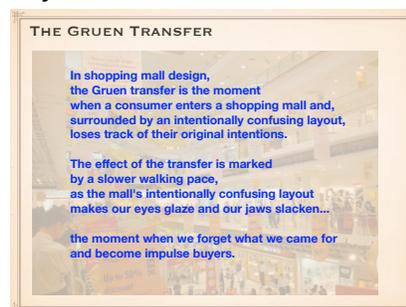
So the real issue is not to get everyone back to reading the the old “serious” media, which is a good idea, but how do we thrive amid the fluff where new horizons are explored — and where the biggest dangers lie.

4. New Dangers

For our new media world brings dangers. The media have become predatory, grasping; you're not in control. Psychologists tell us that shiny new objects pull an infant's attention. Now people take advanced studies to design addictive texts and memes which will reward you with jolts of excitement that keep you from being reflective and thoughtful, while they steal your personal data. We are up against “technologically-induced attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.”



The Gruen Transfer is invading our homes. The Austrian architect Victor Gruen was one of the first to design shopping malls. His name has been attached to an important phenomenon in mall



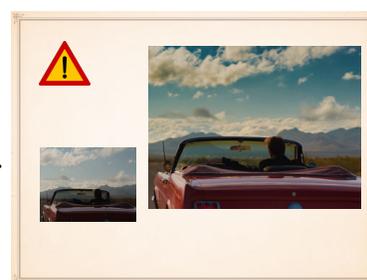
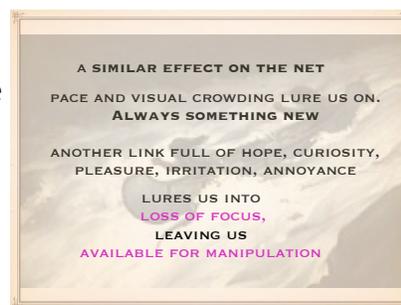
design. The Gruen Transfer is the moment when a consumer enters a shopping mall and, surrounded by a confusing layout, loses track of their original intentions. The effect of the transfer is marked by a slower walking pace, as the mall's intentionally confusing layout makes our eyes glaze and our jaws slacken... It's the moment when we forget what we came for and become impulse buyers.

This now happens at home on our screens. So our active reading needs to be not just exploratory but defensive. A whole new set of skills are needed.

Here's a further danger: Recall the old advertising tactic: stimulate people into a constant state of low level unfulfilled sexual excitement, and into that gap you can pour a infinity of products. That still continues, but now add another tactic: stimulate people into a constant state of unsatisfied anger and resentment, and out of that gap you can pull an infinity of votes and cash contributions. So we get exposes, fake news, endless conspiracy theories, all with urgent appeals.

And, as the salesmen say, "but wait, there's more." Aside from all those predatory grasping Internet manipulators there is something diffuse and deceptive going on, a general hyping and intensifying of our everyday encounters.

For example: Instagram, and the photo editor Luminar claim make your images "pop". Colors and contrasts intensify, blemishes disappear, drama grows. Everything looks so much more exciting. Soon our phones will automatically "correct" our selfies and



portraits. Everything becomes intense, in a CGI world.

However “The inevitable flipside of living in a world of unprecedented stimulation is that when it’s absent, experience can feel maddeningly boring. The problem with ‘persuasive design’, the armory of



psychological techniques used by tech platforms to ensure your attention never wavers, is that the rest of reality wasn’t designed that way. And the problem with depriving yourself of thrilling distractions from the present moment is that you’re left, in the words of the psychotherapist Bruce Tift, feeling “claustrophobic, imprisoned, powerless, and constrained by reality.” (Oliver Burkeman)



This intensification is going to get a lot worse once we have perfected virtual-reality and augmented reality — daily life will seem so pallid.

Our new media world seems to be a world of wondrous freedom, now that we have banished the old Gatekeepers. But in many ways this is an illusion. For we increasingly live in a world curated by personalized micro-gatekeepers. Algorithms watch our every move and deliver what they calculate will keep us clicking.



We need to keep up the old skills of finding the significant units and putting them together, recognizing the rules and conventions for different kinds of media objects, active reading at different speeds and levels. We also need new reading skills, both creative and defensive.

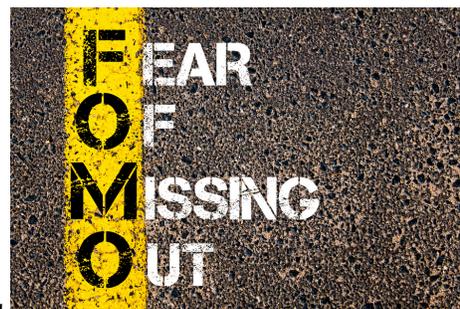
5. Learning to Read, Again

We need new skills to deal with the deluge of new kinds of objects. *How To Read A Book* preached multi-layered reading, ever deeper experiences homing in on the point and of the work. But there's a time problem. Elaborate mixed media, complex web sites, music video and mixed media and performance art take time. It's hard to skim them. Elaborate media productions have to be seen more than once if they're going to be properly perceived; and you seldom have outlines or indexes to help. Nor are there enough trustworthy guides and reviewers.



Do we have time for new reading? If it's hard to do the multi-pass reading you can do with a book or article, how do we decide which is the most significant new media object to approach? How do you deal with the dreaded FOMO?

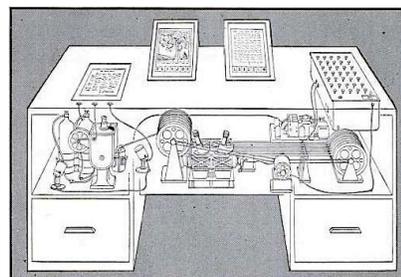
You're always going to miss something. It's not just that you read this article or watch this video rather than another. It's also that you know only a few languages and live only a short time. Enormous historical contingencies limit what you can encounter. You have to presume that the world and culture are rich enough that starting from this inevitably limited base you can still get to the heart of things.



So, how do we manage active inquisitive reading in this new media world? We need new tools for scanning and filtering. We have to learn new grammars for new kinds of media items, we have to learn new sensitivities, to let ourselves be carried away in new ways yet maintain space for

reflection and judgment.

Surprisingly, an article published way back in 1945, just when I was starting grammar school, points the way. Its author, Vannevar Bush, was in charge of coordinating all US science research during World War II. In 1945 he published “As We Made Think” in the *Atlantic*. He wrote that scientific discoveries had led to a deluge of publications that



MEMEX in the form of a desk would instantly bring files and material on any subject to the operator's fingertips. Slanting translucent viewing screens magnify supermicrofilm filed by code numbers. At left is a mechanism which automatically photographs longhand notes, pictures and letters, then files them in the desk for future reference.

AS WE MAY THINK CONTINUED

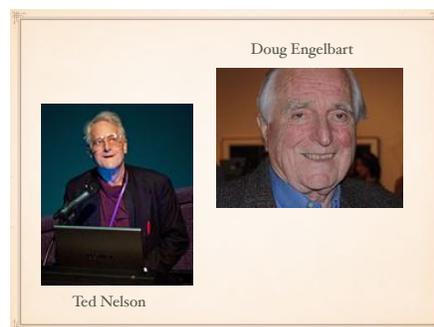
had overwhelmed traditional hierarchical filing systems. He envisioned The Memex, what we would today call a workstation, where great quantities of information would be quickly available. Each item would have a unique address that made it available for links and comments. We could be free to focus on this or that piece of text or images, comment on them, link them with others, publishing our trail of links. Those trails could themselves be combined and linked to by others. the information in these trails would not be hidden in hierarchically stacked folders but multiply tagged, allowing them in effect to be stored in many places at once.

All this was to be done with microfilm and punched cards. But then came computers and the net. Bush had shown us that what was needed to navigate the deluge were new tools for active reading: methods to survey, gather, filter, tag, link, and new ways to present the results..



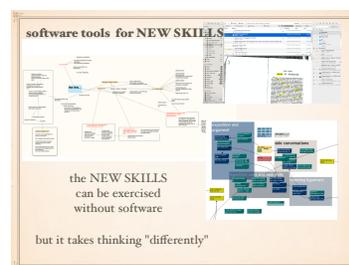
Bush insisted that our new modes of thought needed to employ more than logical argument. Human minds, he said, work by association, making jumps across walls and over borders. Our methods for storing and linking ideas and texts should make moves that break out of and link the boxes in which facts get filed.

Following up on Bush's vision, in the '60s and the '80s Ted Nelson and Douglas Englebart proposed ways of using digital computers to create hypertext nonlinear texts and images that were not restricted to printed pages nor stored in traditional hierarchical arrangements. Neither of these pioneers could fully realize their ideas, but other developers took pieces of their visionary systems and made fortunes creating tools we use now, though without the integration that was at the heart of what Bush, Engelbart, and Nelson had proposed.



Engelbart wrote: "The thing that amazed me - even humbled me - about the digital computer when I first encountered it over fifty years ago - was that, in the computer, I saw that we have a tool that does not just move earth or bend steel, but we have a tool that actually can manipulate symbols and, even more importantly, portray symbols in new ways, so that we can interact with them and learn. We have a tool that radically extends our capabilities in the very area that makes us most human, and most powerful....We need to become better at being humans. Learning to use symbols and knowledge in new ways, across groups, across cultures, is a powerful, valuable, and very human goal. And it is also one that is obtainable, if we only begin to open our minds to full, complete use of computers to augment our most human of capabilities."

As the deluge uprooted my old habits of reading I began using the new tools to learn new skills. The tool we have all learned to use is the web browser but that needs to be accompanied by better ways of collecting text and images, creating new ones, finding or making



You might feel at this point that this new reading and writing is more difficult than its worth, so to avoid the dangers you should Just Say No. Turn off the media, cancel the connections. Build a wall around yourself or your community.



But we should have learned from the 20th century that walling out people and ideas and images doesn't succeed; they return in devious ways and we get worn out from all the energy required to build and maintain those walls.



Also, wall building presumes there is a point of purity in the self which should be protected from evil influences, but what if the self is enriched precisely by its connections? A self exists in interaction; the goal is not isolate the self but to ensure that the self's world of interaction is not dominated.

One way to avoid domination is to be willing to question everything, keeping an open space for wonder and unexpected new ways of thinking and writing. True, but unless we are vigilant, being willing to question everything can easily slide over into never committing yourself, trust nobody, believe nothing. This is dangerous — it's what the manipulators want you to feel. Cautious or cynical avoidance of commitment makes you passive and manipulable; you will go along with the crowd because you can't believe in any reason to rock the boat.



So, just what attitudes and practices can we adopt to preserve inner spaciousness and creativity? I will suggest two. They relate back to active reading.

We need to be more purposive and intentional



about our time and attention. But actively choosing, if you are not building walls, requires exposing yourself to the dangerous media. How to be free without building walls?

Media may try to make you feel political, erotic, angry or whatever, to sweep you away and lock you into pre-programmed responses and overarching narratives. Instead of building walls, let those manipulative appeals in. Let their grasping for your attention be felt, let the anger feelings, the unsatisfied sexual desires be there. Don't wall them out or look away, feel them directly, intimately, but don't necessarily give in to them. Know them for what they are and choose whether to react or not. It's better to experience them and let them pass by than to try to keep them away.



My advice echoes Buddhist teachers: feel your experiences without trying to cling to the pleasant or push away the painful. Mindfulness teachers say that we should observe what happens in our minds without clinging to wonderful experiences or actively pushing away painful ones. Feelings: they come and they go on their own. If a commercial or some program brings an urge to buy — or to hate — feel the urge fully, don't push it away, but also don't get sucked in. You don't have to build a wall, just let the mental space stay open and flexible.



Here is another way of finding space. A few years ago, a young relative and I were playing Scare Me — I was hiding behind a pillow, then popping out and making scary sounds. The child's face would go rigid with terror, and then we would do it again. And again. Suddenly he interrupted the game and said “you should scare me more by doing it this way ...”



He wanted to increase the intensity of his experience so he moved into the role of designer. Then he went back to being frightened and scared. That doubling - the scary game coupled with a critical judgment on how the game is going - belies the usual idea the purpose of reading or novels or movies is to lose yourself. In fact if he had been “totally absorbed” in the game, if he had really thought a scary monster was after him, it would not have been enjoyable.

Visualize a computer gamer deeply absorbed in the action on the screen. Gamers often use back channels within the games to discuss the structure of the game. In the midst of these engrossing immersive experiences the gamer might be



comparing the quality of the game’s graphics with the game she played last week. A reader compares the heroine of this novel with another by the same author. The fan imagines what she will tell the fan club about a movie. Think about the fans of Star Wars or Harry Potter or Jane Austen who go to conferences dressed as characters from those worlds.

Such examples highlight an active reading experience within an immersive media object. We are never totally absorbed. Our life is always doubled. Part of the experience of reading is the awareness that we are

reading, together with the comparisons, judgments, plans that occur to us. These are not external distractions to an immersive experience, they are part of what it means to be consciously immersed. There is always already room for reflection and commentary even in the most immersive experience. Furthermore, these experiences are always implicitly sharable. That social space provides room for outmaneuvering predatory manipulations.

That's going to be even more important in the coming days of virtual reality: imagine yourself inside something like the starship Enterprise holodeck and saying to yourself this reenactment of *King Lear* or *Pride and Prejudice* is not as good as the one we had last week, or, these costumes are not appropriate.



You might think such thoughts would decrease the emotional impact, but really they add more layers and complexity. Again, if you were totally absorbed, as if hypnotized inside the virtual world, “you” would BE Hamlet or Darcy, filled with their fears and concerns, making their self-reflections, not reading and enjoying. You can approach total “immersion” but you can’t attain it without destroying it.

We need to find ways of organizing our active double inhabitation of texts and immersive experiences, extending the skills of active reading of texts we learned long ago. Like my three year old relative, we need to design ways to increase the active complexity and intensity of our reading.

7. “Critical Thinking”

The space-making practices I've been talking about improve awareness and self-reflection. But are they “critical” enough? Pundits often stress the need for more “critical thinking” in our world of predatory media and fake

news. But how do we think critically? Gain perspective? Avoid being trapped in a limited framework? Question presuppositions? Spot logical fallacies? Learn how to construct good arguments? All of the above. And all of them require the flexible mental and social space fostered by the two practices I have been describing.

There are many modes of criticism. One is practiced by professionals, reviewers of films, arts, books, and political and cultural commentators, and the like. I picture such critics standing on a tower remarking on what the ordinary people are writing or creating down below. The critic's tower is built with the planks of a theory, perhaps a Freudian psychoanalytic theory or a Marxist or conservative cultural critique, or it could be a liberal or deconstructive theory. The tower provides distance and a new language so the critic can view the media and cultural products and reformulate or translate them, applying a Freudian Oedipus complex to Hamlet or a Marxist class analysis to Jane Austen.



Such critical distance is important and sometimes needed but it is not the only kind of criticism. People on the ground, amid the media or in the political scrum or inside the computer game, have their own ways of critiquing what surrounds them. Instead of reformulating or translating their situation into some distanced analytic language, they critique values or presuppositions by pushing at them from inside. They make impertinent moves.

Think of the efforts of the powerless to critique the powerful by mocking them exaggerating them. Think of



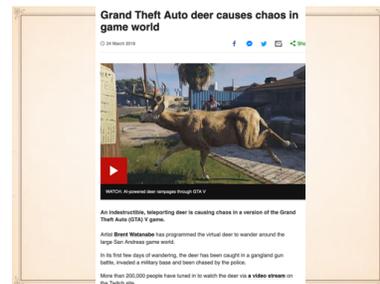
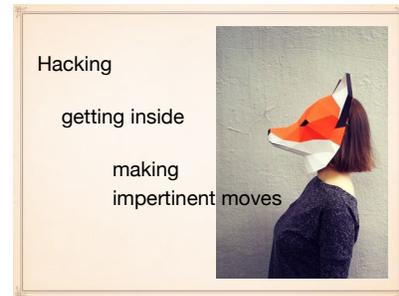
upstart politicians defying the usual rules of campaigning. Think of game players hacking their game, for instance imagine saying to your partner in a shoot 'em up game “maybe we should just sit down and negotiate with the enemy.” The mechanics of the game may not allow such negotiation but proposing it challenges roles and values and makes players wonder about the framework they live in.

A famous hack of this sort showed up in the computer game *Grand Theft Auto*: a hacker modified one of the servers, inserting an immortal deer into a game all about driving cars and fighting rivals. As players moved cars or snuck around, his stag would get in their way and could not be killed or avoided. Players were forced to confront the persistence of nature and its finite resources.

Let me close by citing the image of “surfing” the Internet. This cliché suggests hopping from one wave to another, always running ahead by the lure of the next link, looking for a jolt of information or adrenaline or eroticism or anger.

But the image of a surfer can have a quite different meaning: a truly expert surfer is intent upon the motion and rhythm of this particular wave, working to blend with the wave gracefully to ride this wave longer and better. This is immersive in the best sense -- though if the surfer loses touch with this wave, she will be immersed in the other more usual sense.

Today’s media objects, if “read” well, can achieve the steady intensity of



the expert surfer, but we also face the danger of being swallowed up. That's why we must work to maintain the social and internal spacings built into what it means to be self-consciously "in" any world, old or new. There is no master key or perfect language. There is no tallest critical watchtower. There is no simple inhabitation, but we are present here, making our way, reading and writing, keeping open space and time.



References:

The quotation from Oliver Burkeman on page 12 is from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/29/dopamine-fasting-tech-fad-might-work>.

Vannevar Bush's "As We May Think" article proposing the Memex was published in the July 1945 issue of *The Atlantic*.