

# Reading the play

Games and literacy – a starter

**Philip Minchin**

euchronic@gmail.com

## Introduction

- I've worked in human rights, publishing, theatre, film, games, libraries, IT.
- I'm passionate about reading & what it enables.
  - I am NOT a literacy expert.

...but maybe I can tell you some stuff that might help with motivating people to read, and making reading seem easier and more fun.

(Also, apologies for the slideshow.)

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

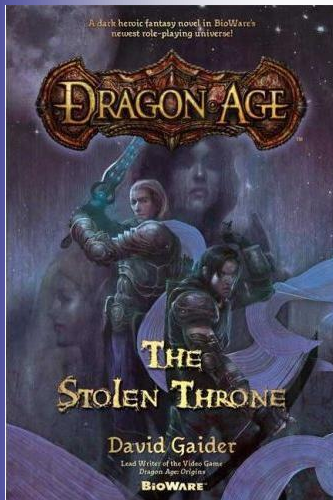
## Related reading

Games can be about anything, so anything can be related reading.

But games in general terms are systems which often involve numbers and other people. (Hence "game theory".) That aside, anything to do with psychology, potential game settings, and systems.

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## The Book of the Game...



**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## The Book of the Movie of the Game...



Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Ancillary prose (Tie-ins)

Tie-in fiction:

- *Halo*
- *Mass Effect*
- *Dragon Age*
- *World of Warcraft*
- *Dungeons & Dragons*
- *Magic: the Gathering*
- *Doom (!)*
- *Battleship (!!)*

If it's had any kind of commercial success, odds are there's a tie-in novel. (Quality *not* guaranteed.)

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Ancillary prose (Hints & Guides)

Pretty much any AAA title will have an Official Guide (often published by Prima).

Useful as an introduction to non-fiction reading?

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## In-game prose (Lore)



Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## In-game prose (Lore)

- *Mass Effect, Dragon Age*
- *Morrowind, Oblivion, Skyrim*
  - *World of Warcraft*
  - *Planescape: Torment*
  - *Magic: the Gathering*
  - *Dungeons & Dragons*

**Some games contain millions of words of writing. Reading quality prose – especially dialog – doesn't require reading books. (And if it does, they might be virtual books inside a game.)**

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Player prose

- In-game, in-character writing.  
(Google "Ascendant-Os" for a laugh.)
- On-line discussions – players analysing story and systems
- Fan fiction – people playing in their favourite fictional universe (whether game-based or other)

**After *Fifty Shades of Grey*, acting as though fan fiction is negligible is no longer viable.**

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Player prose

**Moving to a Guild: Good or Bad?**

Good	<input type="text"/>	50.7%	[ 102 ]
Bad	<input type="text"/>	15.4%	[ 31 ]
I like cheese. (Pollwhore)	<input type="text"/>	33.9%	[ 68 ]
Total Votes:			[ 201 ]

1 2 3 4 5 6 ... 12764 12765 12766 > >> >>> x | Jump

**Zaeyde**  
Community Member

**This Thread's Been**

The GCD Sniper Game has been a home to many a GCDer for the five or so months it existed in the GCD. Originally consuming *thing*, and a quickly growing community. Within a few months, it was the largest and fastest growing th eventually I had no more time to continue updating every night, and the game suffered and fell to off topic discussion

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Games with words

- *Taboo*
- *Spellbinder* (NT ESL story)
- *Balderdash | Dictionary*
- *Dixit*

**Transform the (genuine) challenge of written language: play keeps the challenge but makes it fun, familiar and non-threatening**

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Games that *are* words (and stories)

- *Once Upon A Time* – card game of telling fairy stories and folk tales
- Role-playing games – word-based games that make their players heroes
  - Often demand extensive reading (and have created entirely new literary forms – settings, adventures)
  - Expand vocabulary
  - Encourage in-character thinking
  - Develop social skills, teamwork, even leadership
  - Encourage imagination, world creation
  - Numeracy & probability too, usually!

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## More about RPGs

If it exists, there is an RPG of it!

- **Heroic fantasy:** *D&D, Pathfinder*, dozens more
- **Superheroes:** *Mutants & Masterminds, Icons*, more
- **Paranormal/horror:** *World of Darkness – Vampire, Werewolf, Mage, Hunter, Promethean, Changeling* ; *Call of Cthulhu, De Profundis* ; *Don't Rest Your Head*
- **History:** *Agon, Primitive* (using words is a special ability!), *Steal Away Jordan*, games in other genres set throughout history
- **Misc:** Romance (Georgian and modern), surreal post-apocalyptic weirdness, modern-day myth, anthropomorphic animals, techno-dystopian satire, Blyton-esque child sleuths, English murder mystery
- **Big franchises:** *Star Wars, Star Trek, Doctor Who, Game of Thrones, Lord of the Rings, James Bond, Marvel & DC comics, Battlestar Galactica, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Firefly/Serenity...* oh yeah, and Shakespeare!

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Even more about RPGs

- Links to other literary traditions: *Scion, Agon, Baron Munchausen, Passages, The Play's the Thing*
- Live role-playing crosses into improvisational theatre
- Living campaigns see players' characters affecting the fictional setting in ways that are then reflected in printed fiction.
- Bajillions of hooks into real-world reading: history, geography, economics, etymology, mythology, ethnology, zoology (crypto- and other)... even medieval industrial chemistry (salt production story)

Making it fun makes it relevant.

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## A brief tangent: Library *Really* 2.0

- Allowing users to comment on our content is not "2.0". User-created content is what makes something 2.0.
- Whole other presentation on what this means for libraries, but library users making their own stories is surely in line with this – and libraries archiving such stories might be too.

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com



# Literate play

We've gone from  
**reading about playing**  
to  
**playing about what we're reading**

Am I still talking about literacy?

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

# Literate play

## Why do we care about literacy?

- Literate people can more easily, and often more clearly, understand and shape their lives in freedom.
- Literate people can communicate to and work with others better.
- Literate people are more cosmopolitan and ready to learn.

**Literacy fosters freedom, happiness,  
community and excellence.**

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

# Literate play

## What do we mean by literacy?

- We mean not only the *ability* to absorb and consider ideas and information independently, but a mind that has done so and actively seeks to do so.
- Being "literate" is not just being able to read, it is being well-read, i.e. having a store of past knowledge and analytical skill to bring to bear on the current read.
- Clearly some of the above games both presume and foster literacy in this sense.
  - Playing with anything is a way to enhance understanding and learning. That's why we evolved it.

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

# Expanding ideas of literacy

## Is reading necessary for literacy?

YES  
AND

- ONLY reading is not enough. Multi-literacy, the ability to decode, analyse and discuss multiple formats, is increasingly important.
  - Systems literacy has never been more important, and is only becoming more so.

Philip Minchin  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Systems literacy

- In an increasingly urbanised world, the systems that shape our lives are increasingly social rather than natural in origin.
- They are therefore increasingly arbitrary and malleable.
- Encouraging people to engage with rules as things that can be decoded and understood, should be fair, and can be changed is absolutely compatible with our mission.

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Social, or psychological, literacy

- Most games encourage you to think about what other people are thinking.  
(Some games are purely about reading other people's intentions and loyalties from their behaviour and body language.)
- Games foster an appreciation for the minds of others.
- Games encourage you to analyse systems from multiple points of view.

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Literary literacy

Just so we're clear: while I think we could look at expanding ideas about literacy, I'm not in ANY WAY decrying or advocating against reading.

**READING IS ONE OF THE BEST THINGS EVER.**

(There's a reason I have glasses.)

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## In summary

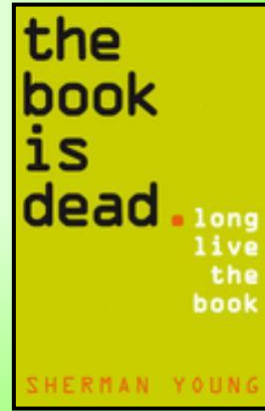
- Help them read about what they love.
- Find the existing reading in and around what they love.
- Get them creating their own written works about what they love.
- Words become useful and pleasurable, a source of play rather than work.
- Who doesn't love the places they play?

Thank you!

**Philip Minchin**  
euchronic@gmail.com

## Further input

- *The Book Is Dead, Long Live The Book* by Sherman Young
- Brenda Brathwaite's *The Mechanic is the Message* series, especially *Train* ([tinyurl.com/gdctrain](http://tinyurl.com/gdctrain))



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