

Fiction and Interaction

how clicking a mouse can make you
part of a fictional world

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about works in which the user is a character in the fictional world, and it is about the kind of interaction that such works allow. In this introduction I will explain my research goals and introduce the theme of control, which is important in the thesis. I'll also describe the genres I'm looking at, define some basic terms and present a summary of what each chapter deals with. First, though, I'd like to introduce you to David Still:

You have the opportunity to be David Still.
Would you like to know more about who you could be? (Still 2002)

I can describe *davidstill.org*, but I can't tell you whether it's art, performance, literature, fiction, fact, forgery or joke. Let me describe the site to you and you'll see my difficulty.

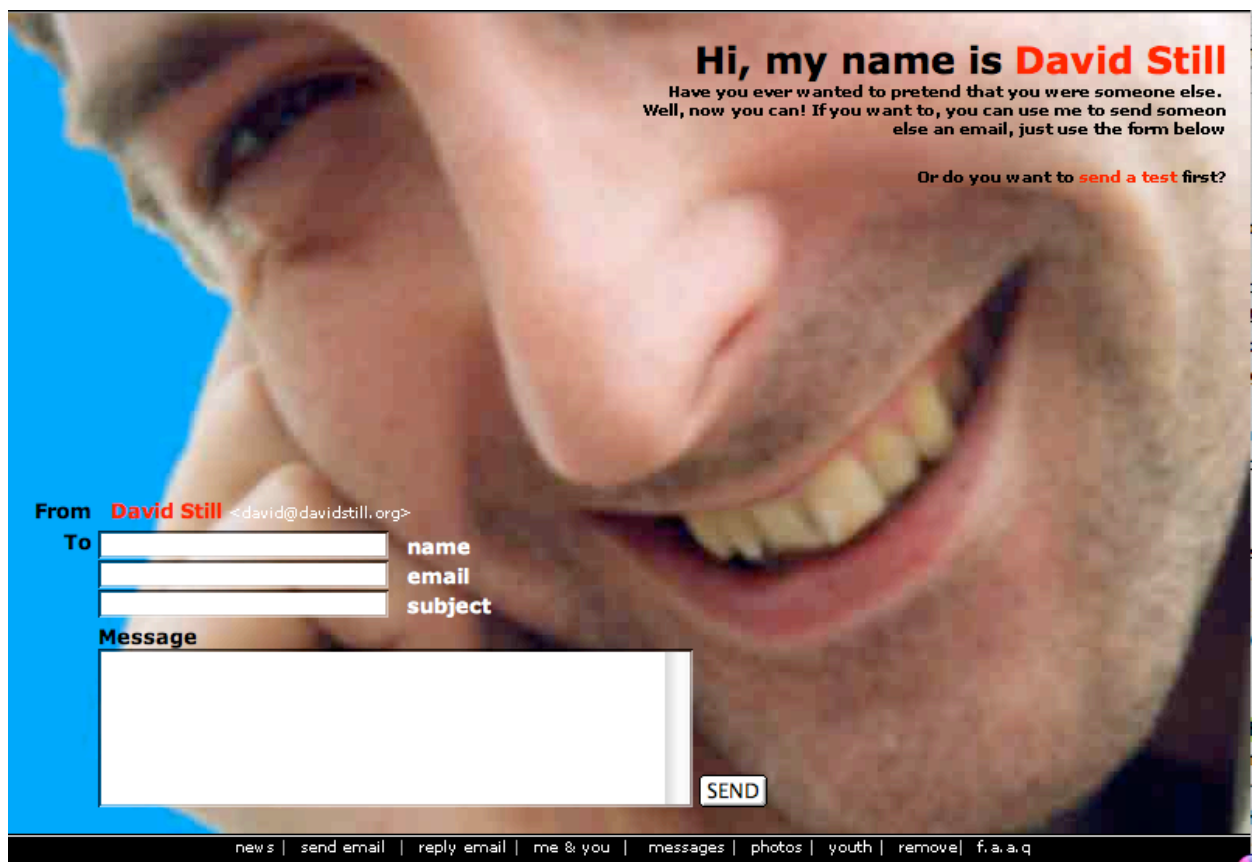


Figure 1. The entry page at <http://davidstill.org>, with a form from which email can be sent in David Still's name.

When I enter the URL <http://davidstill.org> into the address field of my web browser, the entire window fills up with the face of a smiling man. The image is cropped so that only one eye is visible, but it looks straight at me, head cocked to one side in a greeting that is almost flirtatiously coy¹. A few sentences are superimposed upon the image:

Hi, my name is David Still
Have you ever wanted to pretend that you were someone else. Well, now you can! If you want to, you can use me to send someone else an email, just use the form below.

“Use me”, it says. Already the question of use and power arises.

Along the bottom of the screen is a navigation bar with links to different parts of the site. In the section labelled “messages”, you can browse through, and if you like, send prewritten emails in David’s name. Choose “reply email” and you can see what people who have been sent emails from “David Still” have replied to him, and you can choose to reply, still in David’s name, to any of these. In “youth” you can read more about David’s, sorry, *your* youth, and in “me & you” you can read the following description of your surroundings as David Still:

You live in a neighbourhood called *The Reality (De Realiteit)*. No, really, you do! It may seem unusual, but all of the following is true, and you love it! All the neighbourhoods here have names like these, for example, Almere has the film neighbourhood where you can live on *Humphrey Bogart Straat*, or *Audrey Hepburn Straat*. A colleague lives on *Jimi Hendrix Straat*, in the Music Neighbourhood, right round the corner from *Elvis Presley Straat* and *Bob Marley Straat*. The City of Almere can be like this because it is only 25 years old, built on Polder - 50 years ago there was only the sea here.

You also love the buildings in Almere, particularly the one you live in. It was love at first sight. Called *Zeiltoren (Sail Tower)*, it is No. 18 on de Realiteit and is lovely and blue, unlike anywhere else you've lived before.

From there, you can poke around in photo albums of your adult life and of your childhood, and you can read stories about your childhood memories. Taken by themselves, these stories are simple hypertexts, with few links, rather like the stories you can read at *The Fray* (Powazek 2002). These stories are easy to classify as

¹ Later, when you read about *Online Caroline*, you’ll find that I’m surprised that some male readers appear to experience Caroline as flirtatious. I expect some people will be similarly surprised that I find David flirtatious.

narratives where links and images constitute an important part of the narration. But the site as a whole is much more than narrative. Or rather: it is something other than narrative.

A site like *davidstill.org* could easily be presented as art. But it is not displayed in an art gallery or among a net artist's works. The site has no context other than the context created by other sites linking to it. When I first found the site, there were no links pointing to it from art sites – it was not listed in Rhizome's art base, where network artists enter their projects, or linked from a curated net art exhibition or a critical journal or even from artists' listservs. The only links I found were from weblogs and small, personal sites. None of these sites appeared to have more information about the project than what is offered on the website itself.

A few months later, after I'd sent some messages as David Still, and received a couple from him as well, I received an email from an "independent artspace located in De Realiteit, an experimental architectural enclave in Almere" (Cargo 2003). The email was a press release inviting me to a surprise birthday party for David Still, effectively placing the project within the established art world:

"A good neighbour is worth more than a distant friend" runs an old Dutch proverb. Cargo has taken this to heart and, on 9 March, will be throwing a surprise party for David Still, the stranger who entered the world via cyberspace about two years ago, when he also became part of De Realiteit. Cargo thinks that virtual personas are just as entitled to a birthday, and is seizing this opportunity to introduce web art to a wider public. Cargo has invited a number of visual artists and curators to contribute to the party -by baking a cake, serenading David or singing his praises. And for all those who have yet to meet him, David will be there, online, to introduce himself. (Cargo 2003)

Two different possible explanations as to why this site exists can be found within the work itself, among the prewritten emails we are invited to send out to our friends in David Still's name. If we assume that the site's contents and David Still himself are fictional (and they may not be), then the first explanation resides inside the fiction with them. This explanation is from the prewritten message titled "See me. Be me.":

You inspired this site - it's just as much yours as mine. You know sometimes, when I'm thinking of new photos or text I can use, it's almost as though you were in my head - you feel that close! If I can't physically be near you, this is the next best thing. You can see what I see, read my thoughts, even use my name - you can more or less be me. I want to feel there's no distance between us - I want you to climb inside my head, I want you to see me. Feel me. Be me.

This is a continuation of the “use me” motif presented on the first page of the site. There is a desire to be inhabited, taken over, used by the audience which positions the visitor to the site – the user – as active. Indeed the user does have a great deal of freedom: emails can be sent to anybody the user pleases and though prewritten emails are provided, the user can write his or her own just as easily.

The second explanation of the site’s intent is from the message titled “Playing the Hero”, and this one appears more conventionally likely though it is far less evocative. It describes a person who needed a hobby, and who therefore set up this site:

When I just moved here, I was quite excited. New opportunities. New people. But I quickly got caught up in the old rut. Work, work and more work. But I love being in communications. I love meeting people. So I decided to make my work my hobby and designed a site for myself - about me - but something you can use as well. I suppose I'm a sort of real life screen hero. You can 'borrow' my identity - send people emails pretending to be me.

You know, it's getting kind of weird. Maybe I've become an artist - or am I the work of art?

Though this scenario is easy to imagine as being actual, in a way it is more unsettling than the first explanation because it blurs the boundaries of fiction and reality. If we believe this scenario, then David Still is an actual person, actually living in a suburb of a Dutch city, who has decided to offer up his identity to chance passers by on the Internet. Are those pictures really of David Still, then? Are those stories really his memories? What would it mean to offer one’s genuine identity (or a shell of it) to be used by anyone, for any purpose? If he is not a performance artist, widely publicising this, what does that do to our view of the everyday world? Is this simply the way people act nowadays?

Davidstill.org offers the user a very clearly defined role, that of David Still. He is a man in his early thirties who works in communications. We know exactly what he looks like and what his home looks like. And the role is offered clearly to us. The work addresses us directly, using the second person: you. That "you" implies a more or less specific role which we are invited to enact. We are given distinct actions to perform in this role: we can send emails, browse through his memories and photos, imagining they belong to us, and we can reply to emails sent to him.

This thesis is about works that do these things. It's about works where the user is offered a role in the fiction. What happens when you become a character in the story you're reading?

Control

In the last years the thematics of control has cropped up again and again in digital works that tread the borderline between art and game. The reader or user is set in a situation of seeming control and is then shown that this control is illusory, and in fact, the reader is *being controlled* rather than controlling. The relationship between machine and human – or art work and audience – is not equal and never has been. Until the last decade or so, this inequality was usually quite clear: the audience is passive. Of course that passivity was never absolute: we would interpret, discuss and respond to art, turn the pages of books, choose which TV channel to watch, appropriate art according to our own desires and needs. Sometimes artworks have caused riots or panic; books have been burned and banned. Participatory theatre and situationist art often required certain actions from the audience, and there have been books that needed to be shuffled or ordered by each individual reader. But most art we encountered expected us to stay still and look or listen carefully.

With computers, that has changed. If I go to an exhibition of digital art, most of the art works require me to do something rather than to stay quiet. For instance, Gary Hill's *Tall Ships* (1992) is an installation piece where the audience enters a dark tunnel. On the walls are faintly projected video images of people, standing at first with their backs turned. Nothing happens while the audience remains still. But if a spectator walks up to the projected image, the person in the image slowly turns round and appears to approach the spectator, until he or she stands gazing emptily out at the spectator, large as life though black and white and ghostlike. The image will stay there, dreamily swaying a little, slightly translucent, until the spectator moves away. One could say that *Tall Ships* reacts to its audience, but it is at least as accurate to say that the audience reacts to it. When I encountered *Tall Ships* at the Deep.space exhibition at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in January 2003, the tunnel was full of people moving too quickly for the motion sensors to react appropriately. It was difficult to make sense of the installation. I had heard that there were motion sensors, and that the images reacted according to where you stood, so I experimented until I found out how to move in order to activate the videos.

Another interactive installation that forces its audience to act in particular ways is Gisle Frøysland's *Joystuck III; The Walker* (Frøysland 1999). *Joystuck III* uses a treadmill for its interface. The treadmill is just like those you see in gyms: a simple strip of rubber for running on. Movement is abstracted from place. I saw *Joystuck III* in January 2001, at a joint exhibition at Bergen Kunstforening. A screen hung in front of the treadmill showing a still image of walking people frozen mid-step. I stepped upon the treadmill, accepting its silent invitation, and I started to walk. The image on the screen moved step by step, accompanied by sounds slow and thick as treacle. I trod more quickly, and began to run to force the people on the screen to walk at a normal pace, but try as I would the images moved too quickly or too slowly and something was

wrong: the people were walking backwards. I changed strategies and began to walk backwards myself, forcing the rubbery band beneath my boots to move the wrong direction. The machinery creaked and squeaked in protest but the images gradually became normal: finally the people on the screen walked in the right direction.

If you wish to see the video that forms the ostensible content of this artwork, you must *work* in a very clear and very constricted way. A treadmill is a machine with a fairly clear symbolism: it represents work and monotony, though perhaps also the joy of a workout for those who enjoy gyms. You can't run where you want on a treadmill: no matter how you move, you actually stay exactly where you are.

As I experienced both *Tall Ships* and *Joystuck III*, I followed the machines rather than vice versa. I tried to figure out what was expected of me and I tried to behave accordingly. This is typical of our relationships not only with interactive artworks but with everyday appliances like fax machines, photo copiers and video recorders. While we eventually become accustomed to most of our appliances, adapting our fingers and brains to thinking that text messaging or word processing is a natural extension of our bodies, interactive art works provoke us with constant new interfaces to master, frustrating our attempts to make technology invisible. Interactive artworks like *Tall Ships* and *Joystuck* force us to experience technology and interfaces as foreign, as strange. They provide the defamiliarisation, the *ostranenie*, that the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century demanded of literature (Shklovsky 1988). The interface, the deixis, the interaction between user and machine is made visible.

Tall Ships, *Joystuck III* and *Davidstill.org* are all examples of the kinds of work I explore in this thesis: fictional, interactive works where the relationship between the user and the work is central to the meaning of the work. They are artworks, but I will also be looking at works presented as literature, as games and even as spam, ads and hoaxes.

Being part of a fictional world

My main goal in this thesis is to deepen our understanding of interactive works where the user is a character in the fictional world. I do this by analysing concrete works and by developing a theoretical framework for understanding this kind of interaction.

Within this, there are two main threads. Firstly, I will examine *how* the user is included in the fictional world. To this means I will propose a definition of *ontological interaction*. This work is done primarily in chapters 1 and 2, though it continues to develop throughout the thesis.

Secondly I look at how some works emphasise the *deictic* relationship between user and work above the content of the work. This is explored in an analysis of *Online Caroline* in chapter 3 and more explicitly in chapter 4's discussion of the second person address and the force implicit in it.

The two threads are combined in the discussion of force and control. Ontological interaction equates the user's actual and fictional actions, which can leave the user complicit in fictional actions the work required her to perform in order to access the work at all. The analyses, especially in chapters 3, 6 and 7, are where the exploration of control primarily takes place.

Many previous discussions of interactive narrative have been structural in their approach, and I also suggest a possible narratological analysis of interaction where the user is a character in the work.

My method will be theoretical and analytical. I outline theories that can help to understand this aspect of interaction, suggest a possible model for analysis, and apply the theories and model to specific works. I have chosen two main theoretical approaches: theories of fictional worlds and narratology. The authors I build upon here discuss pre-digital art and narrative, and do not discuss interactivity. I do not simply apply their theories to new genres, instead I select elements of their analyses that are

particularly relevant to interactive works and expand these to describe the relationship between user and work in interactive art and narrative. Throughout the thesis I also draw upon theoretical work that specifically discusses interactivity and digital textuality.

In addition to approaching the topic theoretically I develop my concepts through readings and discussions of a variety of individual works that emphasise the relationship between user and work or user and machine. This both tests the concepts, allows me to deepen their meaning, and presents examples of how one might productively analyse interactive works.

The next section outlines the history of the genres I intend to discuss. Following that there are definitions of basic terms (narrative, fiction, interaction, user) that often cause confusion, and the introduction concludes with an outline of the structure of the thesis.

Interactive art and literature

In 2001, when the British online writing organisation trAce invited submissions to a writing competition, they asked each submitter how they would describe their work. At the award ceremony, Mark Amerika, one of the judges, read a compilation of all the suggested terms for these various forms of writing with computers:

Hypertext : active text : web-specific writing : new media work : new media writing : net literature : Net Art : feminist hypermedia : poetry-multimedia installation : web integrated writing : moving poetry : storytelling : multimedia : hypertext poem : net-art-writing : Linguistic Aestheticism : journalism : new horizon breakthrough idea exposition : internet based narrative : net.art : Possible Art : hyperfiction : Interactive Fiction : Hypertext Fiction : hypermedia : digital literature : lit[art]ure : net.lit : Hypertext Art : post-ultra modern digital art : public literature : Net-narrative : community art : net-essays : cyberpoetry : Digital Exploration : mutations :digital narrative : Net-specific hypermedia poetry : Hypermedia Literature : revolutionary web-specific writing : hypermedia poetry : interactive literature : randomly created web narrative : interactive poetry : Art : Proximism : Theater of Consciousness : Poetry : Confrontationalism : InterMedia Theater : Hyper-Essay : Informational Sculpture : Transformationalistic : Self-generating computer installation : hyperlinked : netArteFact : Web Poetry : Web Art : Web projects : electronic literature : Organic hypertext : poetry and prose : interactive artwork : hypermedia : byte-o-mania : web animated visual poetry : A web-based poem : online content. (Amerika 2000)

These are only the words used to explain artefacts that their creators' thought of as in some way literary, since they were all submitted in the hopes of winning a literary award. None of the works I've mentioned so far can be clearly classified as literary, though they all generate fiction and they are all interactive. Digital media are causing or enabling once separate art forms to converge (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Literature, art, drama, games, film, television, and comics – these once clearly separable forms of expression are merging and it is becoming meaningless to view them as separate. In the late eighties and early nineties, most hypertext fiction was obviously literary: skilfully wrought patterns of words, poetic or narrative, with links. Images were used to some extent in some pre-web works like *Victory Garden* (Moulthrop 1991) and *Patchwork Girl* (Shelley Jackson 1995), and game-like elements were important in *Uncle Buddy's Funhouse* (McDaid 1992), but it was with the coming of the Web that the genre was really exploded. Not just still images but video, animations, and complicated algorithms became increasingly common. Sometimes the network explodes even the notion of clearly bordered works, as in *Davidstill.org*.

The original form of publishing and distributing hypertext fiction was clearly within a literary model, with publishers like Eastgate and Voyager selling the product (on disk rather than in print, but still an object, clearly framed). The Web has a radically different delivery form: everything is accessible to anyone who looks for it or chances upon it while looking for something else. Self-publishing became easy and common. Publication in online journals and 'zines became a mark of quality and recognition, but is not necessary: many of the more successful literary interactive works are self-published. In the last decade's web works, network-specific genres have been increasingly incorporated in web narratives and poems. Webcams, web diaries and serial narratives have become more common both as artistic endeavours in their own right and as elements of and inspirations to hypertext and interactive narrative.

At the same time, visual artists were experimenting with computers and the Internet, though they were largely invisible to the literary community as the literary experiments were to the artists. While the literary artists listed OuLiPo and other forms of experimental literature as their ancestors (Nabokov 1962; Cortazar 1998), the video artists of the 60s, 70s and 80s are the forebears of visual networked art. In addition, a lot of electronic art builds on concept art and the situationist movement of the 60s, emphasising the network rather than the solitary computer. Beautiful images, polished phrases and other marks of careful craftsmanship are often completely beside the point in this kind of network art (Breeze 2003). *Davidstill.org* can be seen in relation to this movement as well as alongside the swell of popular story telling on the web that is evident in sites like *The Fray* (Powazek 2002), in organisations like the Center for Digital Storytelling and in the surge of weblogs over the last few years.

As electronic art and literature were developing as sophisticated but fairly unknown niches in the eighties and nineties, computer games were becoming a major popular industry, rivalling though not surpassing the film industry by the turn of the millennium. Their history lay in the text adventure games of the 70s and 80s, with their focus on adventure, narrative strategy and role-playing; in the multi-user games of the 80s and 90s, with their emphasis on social interaction and role-playing; and in the early graphical games of the 70s and 80s, where dexterity and contest were central.

The works I look at in most detail have many differences, and their creators have assigned them to different genres. *Online Caroline* (Bevan and Wright 2000), which I devote the first chapter of this thesis to, is alternately called an online drama and a soap opera. *Zork* (Blank and Lebling 1981), which was popular in the early eighties, is a text adventure game. That genre is still developing, but is now known as interactive fiction, or IF (Montfort Forthcoming). Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starr's *Dream Kitchen* (2000) is an artwork presented on CD-ROM. On the back cover of the CD it is simply

called an “interactive”. Hypertext fictions of the first half of the nineties were a fairly cohesive genre, and I look in varying detail at three hypertext fictions all published on diskettes in the first half of the nineties by Eastgate Systems: Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* (1990), Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* (1991) and Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995). These are mostly textual, though in the latter two the spatial and visual representation of the map of nodes and how they relate to each other is central to the work as a whole. Megan Heyward’s *I am a Singer* (1997) is a visual narrative distributed on CD-ROM that uses text, sound and video. Tim Etchell’s *Surrender Control* (2001) is a sequence of suggestions and commands sent to subscribers as text or SMS messages to their mobile phones. I also discuss some print books that are narrated in the second person, appearing to address the reader directly as “you”. These books include Steve Jackson’s gamebook *The Citadel of Chaos* (1983), Italo Calvino’s *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1998) and Michel Butor’s *La Modification* (1957).

These works are all conceived by their creators as art or literature. The interaction between user and machine is important in other, less culturally ambitious works too. I discuss some of the short web-based games that have proliferated in response to world events such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and the following wars and debates. I also look at hoaxes, spams and ads that emphasise interactivity both thematically and formally.

Words and definitions

Three words that will be important in this thesis are *narrative*, *fiction* and *interaction*. These words are often used loosely and many disagreements have been caused by different definitions of these terms, and especially of the term narrative, so I will begin by defining how I will use these terms. There are also many different words commonly used to describe the person who interacts with the work: player, reader, viewer, vuser,

interactor and user are among them. I prefer the term “user”, and explain this below. Other technical terms, including *deixis*, *ontological fusion*, *depiction*, *story*, *discourse* and *diegetic levels* will be explained as they are discussed.

Narrative

I will use narrative in the narratological sense, not in the general sense in which it is often used by cultural theorists and in popular debate, but as a structural quality and not as a description of a work’s content or medium. There are several different definitions of narrative within narratology (Genette 1980; Prince 1987; Bal 1997), but the formal structure is the crucial aspect of all narratological definitions. A work is thus narrative or not narrative depending on the way in which it is organised. For my purposes, a work is narrative if it represents a series of events, which the user can reconstruct in chronological order, and the events are bound together by some sense of causality. Works that don’t fulfil these criteria completely may still have narrative aspects, or parts of the work may be narrative.

There are clearly narrative aspects to many of the works I discuss in this thesis, and some of them are narratives in a strict sense. The hypertext fiction *afternoon, a story*, for instance, is a narrative although it can be read in many different ways, because the reader can reconstruct an approximate chronology of events (Walker 1999). The underlying story (what happens in which order) is not always clearcut, but neither are all non-interactive narratives. *Davidstill.org* is not a narrative as a whole, because it presents a situation and some possibilities rather than a series of events that are causally related to one another. It does have small narratives embedded within it, though. The sections about David Still’s childhood are simple narratives, and some of the prewritten emails are also brief, minimal narratives. This embedding of narrative elements within a larger, non-narrative work is common in digital art.

Fictional

Fiction, as I will use the term, is not tied to any one genre or medium. By fiction I do *not* mean an object such as a book or a story or even an image. These objects may, however, generate fiction. Fiction refers to the fictional worlds prescribed by works. A fictional work is a work that generates a fictional world.

This use of the word fiction is defined by the Webster dictionary as: “something feigned, invented, or imagined”. Fiction in this sense is not tied to a specific medium or genre. However, fiction is often used to refer to a verbal, prose narrative. Webster’s first definition of “fiction” is “The class of literature comprising works of imaginative narration, esp. in prose form.” (“Fiction” 1989 def. 1) Fiction is commonly used in this sense, that is as a noun that refers to a tangible object or work: “this work is *a fiction*”. This use of the word fiction, which is expressed in the dictionary definition above, makes the word a formal genre of literature, or perhaps a supergenre. This is a common usage of the term, and obviously, if one sees fiction as a literary genre, a painting or a game cannot be a fiction.

I will not use fiction in this way. In my view, some games and artworks and websites have fictional aspects, just as some literature does. Their having fictional qualities does not mean that they are fictions. Fiction, in my view, is not a genre. It belongs to a different class of concept than game, image, narrative, novel, poetry or concept art. These are formal genres, which we classify according to their formal qualities. Fiction is not an object, it is a process, a fantasy emerging from the meeting of user and work.

My understanding of fiction builds on Kendall Walton’s theory of representational works, and I will expand upon this in chapters 1 and 2. In chapter 5 I will deal with more formal matters and will use narratological theory. For now, it is

enough to point out that narrative and fiction are two entirely different things.

Narratives can be fictional or non-fictional. Fictions can be narrative or non-narrative.

Interactive

The word “interactive” must be the most broadly used and abused word in the field.

Interactive has become a blanket term that is applied not only to anything to do with computers but also used about many non-digital objects. Its popular use is so broad that some scholars argue the term has become worthless (Aarseth 2003b). The word interactivity is often used indiscriminately, but so are other terms that are also used carefully in academic work: narrative and fiction are among them. My task will be to use the word more clearly and clarify what aspects of its possible meanings I will activate.

Interactive works demand that the user perform physical actions in order to access the work. All representational work requires perceptual actions from the user, such as looking or listening, and in addition users interpret. Readers of novels must also turn the pages of their books, but this page turning is mechanic, at fixed intervals, and usually has no relation to the story being read (exceptions include Cortazar’s *Hopscotch* (1998), Pavic’s *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1988), Bing and Bringsværd’s “Faen. Nå har de senket takhøyden igjen” (1971), Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) and Madsen’s *Days with Diam* (1994). Interactive works are not instantly accessible, but require a “non-trivial” (Aarseth 1997) physical action before they can be appreciated. You can’t sit back and watch a computer game or a hypertext as you can listen to a novel being read to you or watch a film or theatre performance. Instead, “the text draws us into it because it cannot exist without our participation” (Douglas 1996: 209). Users must perform physical actions in addition to perceptual actions (such as looking and listening) in order to access digital works.

In chapters 1 and 2 I build a foundation for understanding interactivity in this sense, and the first section of chapter 1 sets the understanding of interaction I have presented in the last paragraphs in the context of other work on interactivity. Another, more structural understanding of interaction is suggested in chapter 5. In chapters 3, 6 and 7 I discuss actual works in terms of the user's interaction.

User, reader, player?

What shall I call the human interacting with the machine? Reader signifies a literary paradigm and gives priority to the verbal text; viewer gives most importance to the visual image and does not signal an awareness of the human's actions and choices. User is a familiar term in discussing technology. Towards the end of *Cybertext*, Aarseth chooses to "dispense with the figure of the reader and instead bring in the user", largely to "keep the idea of readers and reading connected to its usual meanings", while "[the] user is allowed a wider range of behavior and roles across the field of media, from the observing member of a theater audience to the subcreator of a game world" (Aarseth 1997: 173). Aarseth wishes to keep the two concepts apart to avoid the automatic though perhaps faulty transfer of meanings from one communicative situation to another. User is the most commonly used term in the computer game, web design and interactive entertainment industry. Yet as Brenda Laurel points out it's not a word that gives the "user" much respect:

...that demeaning little word, "user". This term implies an unbalanced power relationship - the experts make things; everybody else is just a user. (Laurel 2001: 49)

Outside of technology the word "user" (in English) often refers to drug addicts, people our society in general shows very little respect for. We are not even "users" of most other machines: we operate heavy machinery, drive cars and manoeuvre submarines. Perhaps the widespread adoption of the word "user" in relation to personal computers reveals an unpleasant truth about the relationship between computers and the general

public. Computers and especially networked computers are in fact often thought of as substances that easily can be abused. Internet addiction is a term much loved by the media for its sensationalism, and by rehabilitation clinics for its profitability, but it is also used seriously by many psychologists and researchers. Computer games are also often seen as addictive, and stories abound of people whose lives and jobs and families have been ignored because of their inability to stop playing *Everquest* or some other game.

On the other hand, “to use” can have a different though equally negative sense. “He used her” is a phrase suggesting a callous approach to another human being, where the “she” referred to is treated as a thing rather than as an equal. Here the user is the active party, though he is unethical. Though these instances of the word user have different meanings, they all imply an unequal relationship between the user and that which is used. I will return to this in chapter four, in the discussion of force in the second person address.

Laurel suggests a number of alternatives to user: customer, audience, client, player, participant, partner. The word player gives emphasis to the activity rather than to the relationship. In this way it is closer to words like reader and viewer than to audience or client. Other theorists have suggested other terms. *Interactor* (Douglas 1996; Murray 1997) is intuitively meaningful, but has little currency. In the early nineties, many argued that the reader of hypertext became a co-author of the text, and this writer-reader was, for a while, called the *wreader* (Landow 1992; Landow 1997; Rau 2000). *Vuser* is a similar linguistic compound, but more visually grounded, being constructed from the words viewer and user (Seaman 2000).

Finally, though, I have chosen to use the most common term: *user*. I shall try to keep the word’s ambivalence between activity and passivity open.

An outline of the thesis

Chapter presents an approach to representational art that emphasises the user's activity in generating in a fictional world using the work. I explore this topic using Thomas Pavel's discussion of an *ontological fusion* between our actual selves and our fictional selves when we engage with a fictional work (Pavel 1986) and Kendall Walton's theorisation of how we use fictional representations in our own games of make-believe (Walton 1990). Along the way, I use the example of a rowing simulator and of the interactive installation artwork *Bino & Cool's Masterclass* (Bino and Cool 2002) as illustrations of how these theories relate to interactive works.

In chapter 2 I use Walton's notion of *depiction* and analyses of three interactive works to develop a definition of *ontological interaction*. The works discussed are Michael Joyce's hypertext fiction *afternoon, a story* (1990), the text adventure game *Zork 1: The Great Underground Empire* (Blank and Lebling 1981) and the more visual work *Dream Kitchen* (Cmielewski and Starrs 2000).

Chapter 3 is a close reading of *Online Caroline*, an online drama. *Online Caroline* is a particularly interesting case study because it explicitly includes the user in the fiction: the user plays the role of Caroline's friend. The work uses many web-specific genres: email, webcams and the web diary are among them. It is serial and refuses to stay inside the conventional boundaries of a work of art; Caroline intrudes into the users everyday life by sending daily emails to the user. In my reading I emphasise the relationship between Caroline and user, and relate this to the genre of epistolary fiction as well as to *Online Caroline's* own themes of captivity and power in relationships.

Chapter 4 discusses the second person address rhetorically and narratologically, and offers a different approach to the question of how users are included in texts. Most representations appear to ignore the reader, audience or viewer. Literary narratives are usually told in the first person ("I") or the third person ("she" or "he"), and characters in

films rarely stare at the camera to speak directly to the audience. There have been exceptions to this rule before, and in some eras the direct address was more common than it was for most of the twentieth century. Today is it common again, and using discussions of the second person in narrative I discuss the force that is implicit in this form of address when the addressee does not have the opportunity to answer freely.

The fifth chapter proposes a narratological model for understanding how the user is positioned in narrative, interactive works. I argue that interaction can be seen in relation either to the discourse level of a work or to the work's story level, and I suggest a model that allows these different levels of inclusion to be compared to each other. I relate this model to models proposed by Espen Aarseth and Marie-Laure Ryan, and conclude by discussing how far such a model can take us.

In chapter 6 I discuss exploitative fictions: spam, scams, web hoaxes , genres that are rarely discussed in conjuncture with art or fiction. Here the question of ontological fusion becomes crucial, because these systems not only encourage immersion in a fictional world, they also try to keep the user trapped inside the fictional world. I explore what happens when the user relates to a specific fictional character rather than with a work as a whole. Relating directly with a fictional character we straddle the boundary between actual and fiction. The dialogue between user and fictional character is a subcategory of ontological interaction.

Chapter seven is devoted to exploring a series of web games and simulations made in response to the attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, and the political events and wars that have followed. While some of the games are almost naïve in their simple interaction (the instructions for one of these games simply read “click to kill bin Laden”), others manipulate the user by only permitting actions condoned by the values implicit in the work. Discussing these works allows me to deepen my analysis of power in the relationship between user and work.

Finally, the conclusion summarises the main points of the thesis and presents a cohesive view of the various threads that have been dealt with.

CHAPTER 1 **FICTION AND ONTOLOGICAL FUSION**

When we engage with an interactive narrative, a hoax web site, a computer game or a digital installation art work, we *do* something more than we usually do when we watch a movie or read a book or look at pictures in an art gallery. As stated in the Introduction, this thesis will explore the way in which interactive works require users' to perform actions beyond perceptual actions in order to access digital works, and how these actual physical actions relate to the fictional world generated through this interaction. The physical actions the user performs may be no more arduous than clicking a mouse, or they may include walking around a space in a particular way, pulling a plastic trigger, jumping on a dance mat and so on.

Though interactivity is a disputed term (Aarseth 2003b), the basic concept is the same whether one chooses to call it interaction or not: there is a feedback loop between user and machine where the user has some influence on the machine and the machine has some influence on the user. Formal definitions distinguish between two or more kinds of interactivity based on the exact nature of the user's possible actions (Joyce 1995; Aarseth 1997). Other definitions focus instead on whether or not the user is or feels *part* of the work (Laurel 1991), or experiences immersion (Murray 1997; Ryan 2001b) and agency (Murray 1997). These latter definitions could be called ontological as they emphasise the user's being inside or outside of the fictional world. The formal and the ontological understandings of interactivity have also been combined in a single model (Ryan 2001a).

Ontology is the philosophy of *being*. I call Murray's and Ryan's definitions of interactivity ontological rather than formal because they discuss the user's being and

status in relation to the work rather than the actions that the user can perform due to the work's structure.

Many definitions of interactivity concentrate on the work. It is possible to instead view interaction from the point of view of the user. Users may be immersed, be given agency or permitted to make choices. A more active verb is also found in some analyses of interaction: the user performs. Jay David Bolter pointed this out as early as 1991, and reiterated it in the second edition of *Writing Space* (Bolter 2001: 173): "The reader performs the text, perhaps only for herself, perhaps for another reader, who may then choose to perform the first reader's text for others" (173). Bolter compares this performance to that of actors or musicians, who are bound to the possibilities of their instruments or scripts as we are bound to what our computers and software will allow us to do. But musicians and actors perform for an audience, and most interactive works do not require an audience. They only require users.

Perhaps the user does not perform in all interactive works. Comparing interactive works to performance art, David Saltz writes that "Rather than functioning either as performers or as authors, hypermedia audiences function as explorers. (..) Their object of attention is the work, not themselves in the work." (Saltz 1997: 121) Saltz sees interaction as performative only when the interaction is the main point of the work:

[A] participatory interaction is performative when the interaction itself becomes an aesthetic object; in other words, participatory interactions are performative to the extent that they are about their own interactions. (Saltz 1997: 123)

This is precisely the category of works that I am interested in in this thesis. Unlike Saltz I think there is some performance inherent in all interaction, and as I will discuss in this and the following chapter I think that it is this performance that makes us feel part of the work.

The performance that occurs in accessing digital works has been discussed before, though in different ways than I propose analysing it. MUDs have been studied as

sites of theatrical performance (Tronstad 2001; Hammer 2002). Speech act theory and linguistic performatives have been explored as tools for understanding interaction, notably by Adrian Miles (2001), who theorises links as performatives, and by Ragnhild Tronstad (2001), who has analysed quests in games as performatives. Tronstad's analysis has later been extended by Espen Aarseth (Forthcoming).

I have chosen a different angle in this chapter: I will look at what Thomas Pavel describes as the *ontological fusion* between our actual selves and our fictional selves when we engage with a fictional work (Pavel 1986) and at Kendall Walton's theorisation of how we use fictional representations in our own games of make-believe (Walton 1990). Along the way, I use the example of a rowing simulator and of the interactive installation artwork *Bino & Cool's Masterclass* (Bino and Cool 2002) as illustrations of how these theories relate to interactive works. In the next chapter I will continue this line of exposition by exploring Walton's notion of depiction and using it to analyse elements of three interactive works.

This chapter, then, is an exploration of the second understanding of interactivity: interaction not as a formal quality of a work but as a perceived inclusion in the work. The way in which the user performs is the theme of this chapter.

What is fiction?

Sometimes, when I'm sweating away at the gym, I imagine that I'm an Olympic weight lifter. The crowd is cheering me on, Mum and Dad are close to the podium holding banners with "You're brilliant, Jillikin!" emblazoned on them in huge letters, and if only I can lift those gigantic weights above my head I'll win the gold medal I've been working towards for a decade. Actually, of course, I'm pulling handles fastened to pulleys and weights on a contraption that looks nothing like a dumbbell, and 5 kilos is a significant load for me. Just as we all do every single day, I am imagining a situation that isn't real.

Though my daydream was prompted by my being in a gym, my imaginings were not prescribed by the gym or the apparatuses. I could have imagined completely otherwise (that I was skiing or lying on the beach in the sun), or not imagined anything at all. Indeed, my daydream may have been prompted as much by things internal to myself as to the machines around me. The process of completing a PhD makes daydreams of lifting impossible weights come easily.

Let's leave the weight apparatuses in the gym and move over to the rowing machines, or as they're often called, the rowing simulators. While the contraptions in the gym are non-figurative devices simply designed to exercise particular muscles, a rowing simulator models an actual boat. You sit in it, grip the "oars" with your hands, and row. Of course, the simulator doesn't move as an actual boat would, and there is no water apart from that in your drink bottle. Some rowing machines have computers attached to them, too. The computer tracks your movements, interprets them according to the system it is modelling and represents the results continuously on a screen in front of you. As you row you see your representation on the screen move down the pixelated river. Each time you move your oars, your avatar makes the same move. You can even race the computer or the person in the simulator beside you.

Sitting in this machine, moving levers as I would move oars in an actual boat, and watching an avatar on the screen move as I move, I imagine myself rowing a boat on a river. It would be almost impossible to imagine myself being an Olympic weight lifter about to win the gold while in the rowing simulator. Perhaps you could do it, if you really tried, but it would be a very conscious effort and you would know that you were breaking the rules. You are intended to imagine that you are rowing a boat, perhaps in a race. In Kendall Walton's terms, the rowing machine generates *fiction* and fictional truths:

A fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something. Fictional propositions are propositions that are *to be* imagined – whether or not they are in fact imagined. (Walton 1990: 39)

Fiction, as Walton defines it, and as I will be using the concept, comes from the combination of imagination *and* rules. My daydream of being an Olympic weight-lifter had plenty of imagination, but it wasn't governed by any rules, and was not dependent on my interaction with the gym equipment. The rowing simulator, on the other hand, clearly sets up rules: These levers are to be imagined to be oars. You are to imagine yourself rowing a boat. It is *fictional* that I am rowing a boat when I use the rowing simulator.

The rowing simulator is not itself a fiction. In fact, I won't be using the term fiction as a noun that refers to a work or genre at all. The rowing machine *generates* fiction. Fiction in this view is more a process or an event than an object.

Interactive works of art tend to have a lot in common with the rowing simulator. The user must perform actions in order to activate the work. Certain actions are permitted and fairly specific imaginings are mandated.

Fiction, representation and simulation

Walton developed his theory of fictionality in a series of essays in the seventies and eighties, and in 1990 he published a cohesive presentation of his theory in a book titled *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representative Arts*. Walton is interested in the way in which the user uses representational works. He argues that the user *pretends*, and that the work of art is a prop in this pretence.

Walton builds his understanding of our relationship with representational works on an analysis of the way we play games of make-believe as children. A doll is a prop in a child's game of make-believe. The doll prescribes certain imaginings. Fictionally, the child is a parent, giving her baby a bath or putting her to bed. Walton argues that

representational works of art like novels, paintings and even some music are props that we use in similar games of make-believe.

Walton's use of the term "game of make-believe" corresponds to Roger Caillois' description of games of mimicry (Caillois 2001). Caillois, who originally published his book on games in 1958, extends Huizinga's definition of games (Huizinga). While Huizinga required games to have clear rules and to be played for no personal gain, Caillois included both make-believe and gambling in his definition.

Many games do not imply rules. No fixed or rigid rules exist for playing with dolls, for playing soldiers, cops and robbers, horses, locomotives, and airplanes – games, in general, which presuppose free improvisation, and the chief attraction of which lies in the pleasure of playing a role, of acting *as if* one were someone or something else, a machine for example. Despite the assertion's paradoxical character, I will state that in this instance the fiction, the sentiment of *as if* replaces and performs the same function as do rules. Rules themselves create fictions. {Caillois, 2001 #335@8}

Caillois's conclusion here is remarkably similar to Walton's, though Walton does not refer to Caillois in his work. Walton also defines fiction as make-believe *and* rules, and both Walton and Caillois see games of make-believe (in Walton's terminology) or mimicry (as Caillois describes them) as fiction, or perhaps more specifically, as creating fiction. It is worth noting that since Walton's use of the word games is equivalent to Caillois's games of mimicry it is closer to play (*paidia*) than to formal rule-based games (*ludus*).

The rowing simulator is not a representational work of art, but it is a simulation, and simulations are a special kind of representation. Gonzalo Frasca defines a simulation thus:

Simulation is [the] act of modeling a system A by a less complex system B, which retains some of A's original behavior. (Frasca 2001d)

While literature can describe a boat and describe the feeling of rowing, and images can show what a boat and rower look like, a simulation models the behaviour of rowing: the machine is built and programmed so that a tug at the oars will produce the same sensation of resistance as that produced by actual oars in actual water. Representations

can be described as one-dimensional simulations. A painting of a boat models one single aspect of an actual boat, namely the way it looks to an observer.

The rowing simulator may also be a game. When you race against the computer or against an opponent beside you, the rowing simulator is like any other racing game. If you've bought the right accessories for your game console you can play car racing games where you control the car with a plastic foot pedal and steering wheel. Similarly, the rowing simulator provides you with levers that behave more or less like oars and a seat that slides back and forwards as in a real single scull. There are clear rules, and a situation where you either win or lose.

Dolls can also be said to be simple simulations. A baby doll looks like the object it represents, as a drawing does, but a baby doll also models certain behaviours of an actual baby. Some dolls cry, shut their eyes when they're held horizontally, wet their nappies when fed a bottle of water or laugh when you tickle them. Even rag dolls can be cuddled, put to bed or dressed. Obviously not all aspects of a real baby are simulated, and the simulation is often approximate or imperfect, but it is still a simulation. A theory of fictionality and representation that bases itself on simulation rather than on the aesthetics of narrative or visual art is well suited to help us understand digital works, because these works often use simulation and the modelling of systems in at least a minimal way. Though Walton doesn't discuss simulations as such, he bases his understanding of representational art on the way in which we use and play with simple simulations such as dolls.

Walton's theory is useful in studying interactive works because it discusses fictionality rather than genres and structures. It is a cross-medial theory and so suits the many genres of interactive works well. Works as disparate as installation artworks, interactive narratives and computer games can all mandate imaginings and be used as props in games of make-believe. There are also, of course, many examples of non-

representational works of interactive art and games that *don't* generate fictional worlds, or that only barely do so. *Tetris* is a classic example of a game with neither story nor fictionality. A net.art project like *jodi.org*, with its cryptical interfaces and crashing of your browser, probably wouldn't mandate imaginings either. *Tetris* and *jodi.org* aren't representations of an actual or fictional world, they are sufficient situations in their own right and there is no need for the user to imagine a fictional world to engage with these works.

It is always *possible* to use a work as a prop, but it is not always mandated or intended. For instance, in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray interprets *Tetris* as the embodiment of an American academic's hectic life. For her each block of pixels that falls down her screen is a prop that stands for another item in her to-do list, needing instant attention (Murray 1997: 143-144). Presumably most players do not imagine this, and not doing so does not constitute a breach of rules or expectations in the game. However, the basic assumption that *one* important function of works *can* be to allow make-believe and the generation of fictional worlds lets us think productively about the relationship between user and work.

The user *pretends*. For Walton, this pretence or game of make-believe is far more fundamental than we usually would accept. He argues that even the emotions we feel when appreciating fictional works are fictional. Watching a horror movie where some disgusting, animate, green slime appears to be coming out of the screen, the viewer may feel terrified and exhibit all normal signs of fear: screaming, cringing, a rapid pulse and so on. In everyday conversation we would say that this person was frightened of the slime. Walton argues that in fact, the person was *fictionally* frightened. The fear was not actual but pretended, part of a game of make-believe. A parallel example that may be easier to accept is that of a child playing a game with his father where the father pretends to be a monster. The father jumps up from behind a chair and roars, and the

child screams and runs away – and comes right back for more. This child is not actually afraid, Walton argues, but is fictionally afraid, just as the viewer of the horror movie is fictionally afraid of the slime monster. Another way of saying this is that we *pretend* to be afraid. It is a performance.

Bino & Cool's Masterclass

Walton builds his theory of fictionality on simulations like toys and games, and then uses this framework to show how we play with art. Works of digital art that are primarily simulations are thus very easy to read through the lens of Walton's theory, however this also means that little new knowledge of the works is gained by applying the theory. Looking at a digital art installation, *Bino & Cool's Masterclass*, will however provide a foundation for analysing digital art works in which the user's make-believe is less explicit.

I experienced *Bino & Cool's Masterclass* (Bino and Cool 2002) at an exhibition of electronic art at the *Nordic Interactive Conference 2001*. The installation explores control and the complementary positions of dominance and submission. The system interprets user movements as either dominant or submissive, and presents dominant users with images of a slave on screen and submissive users with images of a dominatrix. When I saw *Masterclass*, the artists who had created it were present. Bino was dressed as a dominatrix, in a leather corset, net stockings and stiletto heels. She held a whip in one hand, casually fingering its tail with the other. Cool stood beside her: blond, obedient and silent. They stood near an enclosure of about four by ten metres that was empty apart from a large screen at one of its short ends. A narrow gap in the fencing allowed a single member of the audience to enter the enclosure and stand or walk in front of the screen. When it was my turn to enter, Bino handed me her whip, and told me to try myself against the machine. So I stepped into the enclosure, holding

the leather whip, and looked uncertainly at the screen where an image of Bino loomed over me, cracking her whip and telling me to obey her. I hesitantly stepped backwards, and on the screen Bino kept ordering me to behave. “You have to move more aggressively”, the actual Bino coached me, “try to dominate the machine!”. So I tried to move quickly and decisively. With fast, determined steps crossing the whole floor space, and an occasional crack of my whip, I managed to dominate the machine for an instant, and was rewarded with images of Cool on the screen, kneeling submissively in front of me.

The *Masterclass* models a system: it replicates certain potential behaviours in a relationship between two people, or perhaps also between a person and a machine. Of course this simulation is very simplistic: one element of a possible relationship is modelled and all others are ignored. To model a system is to interpret it, to emphasise certain aspects above others. Simulation is as selective and potentially subjective as any other representation. As a simulation, *Masterclass* can be understood as a toy, much like the baby doll that I can pretend to feed, burp and sing to sleep.

Like the rowing simulator, *Masterclass* is a simulation that places the user inside the model. When I enter the motion-sensitive area in front of the screen, I become part of the system. Cracking the whip in front of the screen, I use the artwork as a prop (or as a system of props) in a game of make-believe. Fictionally, I am a would-be dominatrix, perhaps a dominatrix-in-training, attending a master class to learn how to dominate the machine. The fictional world is not absolutely determined, but my imaginings are definitely guided by props: the images on the screen and the whip in my hand. In addition my movements position me in relation to this representation: it is a representation that includes me. In becoming part of the system, I myself become more clearly a prop than when I look at a painting. (Though I will show, in the next chapter, how looking at a painting is also to imagine yourself as within the fiction.)

Walton would say that it is *fictional* that I dominate – or fail to dominate – the *Masterclass*. I pretend to be aggressive or submissive, I am not actually being aggressive or submissive. This parallels the child who is not *actually* afraid of the parent who jumps up and says boo, or the cinema viewer who is fictionally afraid of the slime. This pretence is a form of performance, whether mostly or completely for ourselves, or also for the benefit of onlookers.

Ontological fusion

One way of understanding the user's position in relation to the fiction is through Thomas Pavel's theorisation of *dual structures* (Pavel 1986), where a fictional world is overlaid the actual world. If the *Masterclass* generates a fiction of a master class in domination, then that fictional world and the actual world of the art gallery join in an *ontological fusion* between worlds. Each element of the work is double. Bino and Cool are both the artists showing their work and the fictional teachers of a master class. When I enter the area in front of the screen, I too become the site of a fusion between actual and fictional: I am an appreciator of art at an exhibition, at the same time as I am fictionally a pupil in a master class. These points of ontological fusion occur in the elements of the art work that are props in Walton's sense, and in a work like *Masterclass*, I become a prop when I engage with the work. In wielding the whip I accept a role in the fiction. I'll return to this in the next chapter, in relation to the mode of representation that Walton calls *depiction*.

There are many different layers in our understanding of reality. Fictional worlds are accepted as imaginative inventions, perhaps overlaid reality but clearly subordinate to the actual world. Yet they seem real enough to us that readers flock to Baker Street to see where Sherlock Holmes lived and gamers relish the opportunity to see the "real" Lara Croft.

The dual structure between the actual and the sacred in many religions is similar to the dual structure between the actual and fictional. Pavel writes:

Sacred beings and objects, miraculous or prophetic grottos, holy mountains, places of worship, all these provide for the points of articulation at which the two worlds meet in what can be called a series of *ontological fusions*. (Pavel 1986: 138)

The actual world is the primary level in this dual structure. The secondary level is the sacred world of the gods. At the art exhibition, the primary level was the exhibition and the conference while the secondary level was the fictional master class.

The point of ontological fusion can be in objects or places, but also in a person. The Nepalese Living Goddess ("Nepal Chooses New Living Goddess" 2001) is an example of an actual person who is a point of fusion between the profane and the sacred: she is a little girl in actuality, but she is simultaneously the Goddess herself in the sacred sphere. The fictional and the sacred are different, but they have parallel relationships with the actual. For the believers in Nepal it is not fictional that the small adorned girl is the Goddess; for them her being a Goddess is just as real as her being a little girl. The fusion is less absolute in the fictional than in the sacred. The actual world has an ontological priority in relation to fictional worlds that it does not always have in relation to the sacred.

When I crack my whip at the screen in the *Masterclass*, I use the whip and the images I see on the screen as props in my game of make-believe, where I imagine myself working to be stronger than the expert dominatrix. Unlike the four year old girl who is chosen to be a goddess, I do not enter the secondary world completely. She is the goddess to her fellow believers, and presumably to herself. I am the trainee dominatrix for myself, in my imagination – but I am always aware that I am pretending. I know that my actual self remains in the actual world. Any onlookers only see the actual Jill cracking a whip and laughing, though they may in turn use me as a prop in their own games of make-believe, perhaps generating different fictional truths from those that I

generate. The people surrounding the Living Goddess, on the other hand, see the girl simultaneously as the Goddess and as a four year old child.

In effect this separation of actual and fictional self is the same as the narratologists' insistence on the difference between the historical (actual) reader and the textual positions of implied reader and narratee (Chatman 1978; Prince 1980). However, Pavel and Walton give us a different understanding of the relationship between these selves. As Pavel writes:

We send our fictional egos as scouts into the territory, with orders to report back; *they* are moved, not us, they fear Godzilla and cry with Juliet, we only lend our bodies and emotions for a while to these fictional egos, just as in participatory rites the faithful lend their bodies to the possessing spirits. (Pavel 1986: 85)

Pavel suggests that our projected fictional selves may be more “apt to feel and express emotions than are dry, hardened egos”, and relates this to Schiller’s hopes for humanity’s improvement through art, which Pavel sees as a hope that “after their return from travel in the realms of art, fictional egos would effectively melt back into the actual egos, sharing with them their fictional growth.” (85) This also seems to be the assumption made by those who would ban video games or role-playing games because they supposedly cause violence and insanity in the actual world.

When the Nepalese girl menstruates for the first time she will abruptly stop being the goddess and become just a girl again. Even such a complete identification as hers with the goddess can cease, just as I cease to be the dominatrix when I step away from the *Masterclass* and leave the exhibition.

CHAPTER 2 FROM DEPICTION TO ONTOLOGICAL INTERACTION

When we play games of make-believe, “we lend our bodies and our emotions” to the fiction (Pavel 1986: 85). This loan is a bodily, perceptual and often emotional fusion with the fictional world, and it can take many different forms. Kendall Walton (Walton 1990) discusses two main modes of representation: the *description* that is common in verbal representations like literature, and *depiction*, which is frequent in images though not limited to the visual. Walton’s analysis of depiction emphasises the way in which we imagine ourselves as being part of the fictional worlds generated by depictive representations.

Unlike descriptions, depictions include the user in the fiction, and this strategy is also used in many interactive works. However, having developed his theory prior to 1990, Walton does not discuss interactive works at all. In the following I will extend his theory of depiction to include the non-perceptual actions that interactive works require of their users. I combine this with Pavel’s concept of ontological fusion to provide an understanding of how interaction can cause ontological fusion. Finally I will propose a definition of *ontological interaction*, which is a particular kind of interaction.

I will analyse aspects of three interactive works in order to demonstrate how the concept of depiction can be used in interpreting concrete instances of interaction, and to develop the notion of ontological interaction. The works analysed are Michael Joyce’s hypertext fiction *afternoon, a story* (1990), the classic text adventure game *Zork 1: The Great Underground Empire* (Blank and Lebling 1981) and Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs’ interactive artwork *Dream Kitchen* (2000).

Depiction

In depictions, the act of perceiving or accessing the work is “part of the imaginings it occasions” (Walton 1990: 294). This chapter

In non-interactive, depictive representations, the correspondence between the perceptual act and fictional acts is what causes the user to feel part of the story, or to feel present in both the fictional and the actual world. I’ll explain this more clearly, and then build an understanding of interaction that builds upon and extends this. Like all other representations, interactive works require perceptual actions from the user. They also require non-perceptual actions such as cracking a whip, pulling simulated oars or clicking a mouse. Understanding how the user’s perceptual actions fuse into fictional actions will help us understand the relationship between the actual clicking of a mouse and the fictional moving through a world or answering a question.

If I go to an art gallery and look at a painting of a ship in stormy seas, I *imagine seeing* a real ship. I might well point at the painting and say to a companion: “Look at those waves!” While a fictional worlds logician might argue that this is shorthand for my saying something like “In the fictional world of the painting there are waves”, Walton emphasises the make-believe in the statement: at the same time as I am aware that I am looking at strokes of paint on canvas, I am *pretending to see* real waves. This is what Walton describes as playing a game of make-believe. Now, when I play this game, I include my own action in the fiction. I could imagine a fictional position for myself: my son is on that ship and I’m standing on a cliff, watching the ship tossing on the waves so close to home yet so unsafe. Or I could just as well leave my own position blank and open. In either case, my act of looking is part of the fiction.

Walton describes this using the user’s engagement with a Hobbema painting as an example:

The viewer of Meindert Hobbema's *Water Mill with the Great Red Roof* plays a game in which it is fictional that he sees a red-roofed mill. As a participant in this game, he imagines that this is so. And this self-imagining is done in a first-person manner: he imagines seeing a mill, not just that he sees one, and he imagines this from the inside. Moreover, his actual act of looking at the painting is what makes it fictional that he looks at a mill. And this act is such that fictionally it itself is his looking at a mill; he imagines of his looking that its object is a mill. (294)

Two layers of existence coincide, one actual and one fictional. In actuality, the viewer is looking at a canvas with marks that represent a mill. Fictionally, the viewer is looking at a mill. The same act of perception – in this case, looking – is both actual and fictional.

The perception of the work is also the fictional perception of the fictional world. Walton writes:

One does not first perceive [the] picture and then, in a separate act, imagine that perception to be of a mill. The phenomenal character of the perception is inseparable from the imagining that takes it as an object. (..) The seeing and the imagining are inseparably bound together, integrated into a single complex phenomenological whole. (295)

My act of looking is the site of an ontological fusion between actual and fictional world. Ontological fusion has been mentioned in previous research on interactive works (Koskimaa 2000). However, combining an appreciation of ontological fusion with a theory of fiction that embraces the user's active role in imagining the fictional world allows us to see *how* ontological fusion occurs in interactive works. In interactive works, depiction is the mechanism that causes an ontological fusion between user and fictional world.

Walton does not mention interactive works at all, but defines depiction as covering all "perceptual games of make-believe", and not merely visual games (333-4). He discusses depiction in music at some length, writing that "representational music is depictive, typically, when it represents auditory phenomena" (335). Drums in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* represent the firing of cannons, for instance, and hearing the drums, I fictionally hear cannons. Listening as well as touch can be a perceptual action:

When one listens to Haydn's String Quartet, opus 32 (*The Bird*), it is fictional that one hears the chirping of birds. Touching a teddy bear counts as fictionally touching a bear. Theater and film audiences fictionally hear as well as see. (296)

The imagined presence of the user in the fiction, fictionally perceiving the represented events, defines Walton's notion of depiction.

In interactive works our participation is not limited to perception and private or communal games of make-believe as it is in the representational works Walton discusses. In *Bino & Cool's Masterclass*, for example, I both perceive and act. My perception of the dominatrix on the screen is just the same as my perception of the ship in a storm on the canvas: my perception is both actual and fictional. While perception is sufficient to appreciate the painting, to fully engage with *Masterclass* I must perform actions. These actions are more than perceptual: I crack a whip, and I walk up and down in front of the screen. When I crack the whip, my action is both actual and fictional. To rewrite Walton: "The doing and the imagining are inseparably bound together, integrated into a single complex phenomenological whole."

Walton and Pavel are clearly aware of each other's work, but do not connect depiction and ontological fusion as explicitly as I am doing here. Interaction is a stronger and more obvious form of depiction, but the same mechanisms are at work in interactive works as in the painting of a mill by Hobbema. While the actions that fuse user and work in a non-interactive work are only perceptual (looking or listening, for instance), interaction also demands non-perceptual actions, such as kinetic or haptic actions.

Jesper Juul expresses the concept of an ontological fusion in different words, and specifically discusses games rather than representational works in general:

[I]f we play the World War II game *Axis and Allies*, all our actions have a double meaning. We move a piece around a board, but this *also* means invading Scandinavia with our troops. We click the keys on the keyboard, but we are also moving Lara Croft. (Juul 2003)

Here the actions that exceed perception are physically moving tokens around a board or clicking keys on a keyboard. Each of these actions *is also* an action in the fictional world: invading Scandinavia or moving Lara Croft. This doubling of actions so that they are meaningful both as a means of accessing the work and as fictional actions is what causes the ontological fusion and the user's sensation of being immersed in a fictional world.

This way of thinking about interaction becomes more immediately useful if we think about specific works, and particularly if we think about works in which the user's performance and make-believe is not as obvious as in *Masterclass*.

Depiction in hypertext

Hypertext fiction in the late eighties and early nineties was a predominantly verbal art, although images and visualisations of the structure of the work were important in several hypertext fictions, notably Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Funhouse* (1992) and Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1991). In addition, of course, these works are linked, and links are neither a verbal nor visual form of representation, but something else altogether. In the last five or ten years, electronic literature has to some extent merged with visual and concept arts, and these non-verbal elements are often quite easily analysed as depictions. However, links and words alone can also be depictions that bind the reader's "doing and imagining" together inseparably, as I will show in an examination of the first few nodes of Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*. I have chosen this work because it appears to have little in common with a simulation like *Masterclass*, and yet, as I will show, it uses depiction in a way that is similar. *Afternoon* is a minimal example of depiction.

Verbal representations can be depictions, as Walton notes, but this is rare, and usually occurs when the work as a whole represents a specific object:

Reading *Gulliver's Travels* is, fictionally, reading a ship's logbook. The representation of epistles by epistolary novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, of an autobiography by *Tristram Shandy*, and of journals, diaries, and notes by other literary works approaches depiction. But the games in which these works serve are only minimally perceptual; reading is about the only perceptual action that, fictionally, one performs. If one examines the printed text of *Gulliver's Travels*, it will not be fictional that one examines the handwriting of the logbook or observes the formation of the letters beyond recognizing what letters they are. (Walton 1990: 354)

Uncle Buddy's Funhouse is a depiction in the same sense as *Gulliver's Travels* is one.

Uncle Buddy consists of a box containing a computer disk, two audio cassettes, proofread sheets of a short story and a letter from a lawyer. The letter states that these are papers and data left by your Uncle Buddy, whom you may not remember, but who has left them to you in his will. Reading through the assorted material on the disk and listening to the cassettes almost perfectly equates the user's actual perception and investigation of the material with a fictional perception of the fictional object.

Masterclass is a depiction in this way too, in that it models a complete situation.

Masterclass is also saturated with visual and aural depictions: looking at the image of Bino on screen is perfectly equivalent to looking at the mill in the Hobbema painting.

afternoon, a story

Joyce's *afternoon* is not a depiction as a whole, as are *Uncle Buddy* and *Gulliver's Travels*, but it contains elements of depiction that depend on the links. Here is the first screenful of text you see after the title screen:

I try to recall winter. <As if it were yesterday?> she says, but I do not signify one way or another.

By five the sun sets and the afternoon melt freezes again across the blacktop into crystal octopi and palms of ice—rivers and continents beset by fear, and we walk out to the car, the snow moaning beneath our boots and the oaks exploding in series along the fenceline on the horizon, the shrapnel settling like relics, the echoing thundering off far ice. This was the essence of wood, these fragments say. And this darkness is air.

<Poetry> she says, without emotion, one way or another.

Do you want to hear about it?

The first three paragraphs describe the situation, the characters and the events and they present the dialogue. When I read these paragraphs, my act of reading is not also a part of the fiction. I am outside of the fiction. Reading, I imagine the fictional scene: I imagine the woman who speaks, what her voice would be like and what she would look like, and I imagine the narrator. I imagine the cold winter afternoon, already dark, and I imagine hearing the sounds of the ice underneath boots, the slam of a car door. I imagine all these things, using the words and the narration as a prop in a game of make-believe where I construct a fictional world based on what I read. Perhaps I fictionally hear the sounds of the ice exploding in the distance as I read the text. But I do not imagine *my viewing of the words of the text* to be a viewing of this scene, nor, if someone reads it to me, do I imagine my hearing of the words to be a hearing of the snow moaning beneath boots. As Walton writes:

[The reader's] actual visual activity is only the occasion for his imaginings. It prompts and prescribes them but is not their object. (Walton 1990: 294)

Perhaps the words “snow moaning” can be said to have an auditory quality that is similar to the sound they refer to, as the word “shrapnel” does sound a little like an explosion. If we agree upon that, and we might not, but let us say we do, we could perhaps describe these words as possessing depictive qualities. I would then imagine the sound of the word shrapnel (as I pronounce the sentences to myself) to be the sound of the real explosion. My act of perception (of hearing) would correspond exactly to the represented act of perception. The main mode of this descriptive paragraph is not depiction in this sense, though. Had the words been designed to be played by the computer as a sound file rather than read as words on a screen, their depictive quality may have been heightened.

The last sentence of this first node is different from the previous paragraphs. It is a question, apparently directly addressed to the reader, or at least to a narratee: “Do you want to hear about it?” It demands an answer. By answering the question, the reader

accepts the role of narratee, and gains a double existence, both actual and fictional. A contract is established between reader and text, rather like the click-and-accept contracts you “sign” when you open a freshly purchased program for the first time or use your net bank (Walker 2001). At this point in the reading of *afternoon* the user must respond to the text in some way, or keep this node on her screen indefinitely.

The reader can respond in several different ways. *Afternoon* is read on a computer, one node appearing on the screen at a time. A new node is displayed when the reader clicks upon words in the text to follow links, presses the return key to follow a default path between nodes, or uses the control strip (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: The control strip in Michael Joyce’s hypertext fiction *afternoon*, a story. Image courtesy of Eastgate Systems.

The control strip has four buttons. The back arrow allows the reader to return to the previous node that was viewed. The open book activates a window displaying the titles of all the links that lead out of the node, allowing the reader to choose between all the links. The Y/N button is for answering Yes or No. There is a printer icon for printing out a node. Finally, there is an open space for typing into. In the directions that are accessible from the cover screen, the author explains:

Respond to questions using the Yes/No buttons below or by typing. Note that you can also type some words—and occasional one-word questions—in the text entry box to the right of the buttons below.

When presented with the question “Do you want to hear about it?” the reader thus has three choices, besides sitting and waiting indefinitely or quitting the program and abandoning the story. She may answer the question directly by clicking Y or N for yes or no or by typing yes or no into the text box, she may press return and follow the default path or she may choose a different path by clicking on a word in the text or browsing the available links.

If the reader types “yes”, or click the Y, a node titled “Yes” appears, starting with the following sentence: “She had been a client of Wert’s wife for some time. Nothing serious, nothing awful, merely general unhappiness and the need of a woman so strong to have friends.” Type “no” or click N, and the computer responds with a node titled “no”: “I understand how you feel. Nothing is more empty than heat. Seen so starkly the world holds wonder only in the expanses of clover where the bees work.” The node continues in similar style: descriptive, poetic and dreaming. No events are narrated for several nodes. The narrator doesn’t tell the story but instead offers general reflections. If the reader answers yes or no, then, the work appears to listen to the reader’s answer and responds appropriately.

In *afternoon* linked words are not marked. Most nodes have a default link to another node that is activated if the reader presses return or clicks a word or phrase that is not linked. Following the default link is equivalent to ignoring the question posed by the narrator. Most of the words and phrases in this first node are not linked, and will lead to the same default node as the return key: a node with a sole line: “I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning.”

As these strings of narration continue, they wind away from their depictive power and become pure description in Walton’s sense. This means that there is no correspondence between the reader’s actions (looking at the screen, reading the text, clicking to move to another node) and the actions represented. Or perhaps, if we stretch Walton a little, there is a correspondence. The narrator is reluctant to tell his story and yet clearly needs to speak. The single question posed directly to the reader can be seen to set up an imagined conversation. Just as when a friend wants to tell us something, but needs constant assurance that we really want to hear it to be able to divulge her secret worry, the narrator of *afternoon* must be continually coaxed into speaking by our repeated clicks of the mouse or presses of the return button. This is not as immediate

and complete a merging of actions as those Walton describes as occurring when we engage with a depiction, though. Remember, Walton wrote of the viewer of Hobbema's painting that "his actual act of looking at the painting is what makes it fictional that he looks at a mill" (295). Though I can imagine that my act of clicking makes my listening to a friend's story fictional, this imagining is not prescribed by most of the work. In fact, many nodes are hard to incorporate in such an analysis, as they are told in the present tense and ignore the narratee completely, as though they were thought at the time of the event rather than told to a listener or reader.

The question in the first node, "Do you want to hear about it?" *does* require me to imagine myself being directly addressed by the narrator. In that question, the narrator directly addresses me. Perhaps I imagine Peter, the narrator of the story (though I do not yet know his name as I read this node for the first time), turning directly towards me and speaking to me. Fictionally, Peter asks me a question. In the actual world, words on a screen pose a question. Fictionally, I respond by answering yes, or no, or by remaining silent. In the actual world, I answer the question by clicking Y or N or by simply clicking at random. I imagine my actual answer to be a fictional answer. This question and my answer are an example of a depiction. In this depiction there is also a brief moment of what Pavel calls ontological fusion. "Do you want to hear about it?" is asked both of the fictional narratee and of me, the actual reader, and in my acts of reading and answering the question I fuse with the fictional narratee for an instant.

Walton uses depiction to refer to representations in which the actual act of viewing, reading or listening is part of the game of make-believe. This has some similarity with Kacandes's involuntary performatives, where by reading the words you enact what they say (Kacandes 1993; Walker 2001). A sentence like "You've read me this far then? Even this far?" (Barth 1988: 127) is, according to Kacandes, an involuntary performative. We could also call it a depiction. Reading the sentence, I

imagine myself in the position of the “you”, and I imagine myself reading and being spoken to by the text. Walton’s notion of depiction doesn’t cover all the aspects of Kacandes’s involuntary performative, but it does describe the way in which I imagine my actual reading as being fictional, or as being part of the fiction.

Earlier, I said that *afternoon* is not depictive as a whole, as *Gulliver’s Travels* or *Uncle Buddy’s Funhouse* are. Though the work as a whole does not depict something else, it does have an element of depiction in its broader structure. In *afternoon*, the reader’s confused wandering between nodes has often been interpreted as mirroring Peter the protagonist’s wandering between thoughts and memories (Douglas 1994; Walker 1999; Douglas 2000). Both Peter and the reader search blindly (with no map or guidelines) for an answer to the question of what really happened that morning, perhaps suspecting the truth, perhaps avoiding something, but never being certain. Reading the text, the reader enacts a parallel to Peter’s search for truth. The structure of the nodes and the links sets up a way of reading that depicts Peter’s own journey.

Examining this question in *afternoon* indicates that depiction in interactive works can be not only visual, auditory or conceptual, but can also occur in the links and in the act of interaction.

Zork

Another primarily verbal form of interactive work is the text adventure game, or interactive fictions as they are also known. These games were popular in the late seventies and the eighties, and though they are no longer mainstream, fans of the genre still play the old games and create new variants of the form. The bestselling *Zork* trilogy from Infocom is a close descendant of the original *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976), and is set in intricately booby-trapped dungeons and caves where the player must

grapple with monsters and puzzles, gaining points meticulously until finally finding and securing a glorious treasure.

Afternoon poses one single question to the user: “Do you want to hear about it?” The player of *Zork 1: The Great Underground Empire* (Blank and Lebling 1981), on the other hand, is constantly required to give input in the form of simple sentences. Playing *Zork* is a continuous dialogue between game and player. The game briefly describes an event, situation or object, and then blinks its cursor until the player responds.

Here is a transcript of a typical scene in *Zork*: a fight with a troll. The words I typed in are after the > marks, and the rest was provided by the program.

A nasty-looking troll, brandishing a bloody axe, blocks all passages out of the room.
Your sword has begun to glow very brightly.

>kill troll with sword
Clang! Crash! The troll parries.
The axe sweeps past as you jump aside.

>kill troll with sword
A quick stroke, but the troll is on guard.
The troll hits you with a glancing blow, and you are momentarily stunned.

>kill troll with sword
You are still recovering from that last blow, so your attack is ineffective.
The axe sweeps past as you jump aside.

Each segment of text provided by the game is a description, which is the most common mode for verbal representations. Reading the transcript like this, the act of viewing the work does not correspond to the fictional act of viewing that which the work represents, which would be required for the work to be what Walton calls depictive. When you play the game, though, the experience is very different. The words scroll by on the screen as fast as you can type your responses, and your typed commands directly cause fictional actions to occur.

In *Zork* there are two main kinds of actions performed by the player (in addition to the interpretation that always occurs): the perceptual action of reading the words presented by the text, and the typing of commands.

When I type “kill troll with sword”, that act corresponds to me fictionally trying to kill the troll with my sword. The correspondence is not as direct as the depictions Walton discusses, because I actually type but I fictionally fight. Walton wrote that the viewer’s “actual act of looking at the painting is what makes it fictional that he looks at a mill.” (294) In *Zork*, it is the player’s actual act of typing “kill troll with sword” that makes it fictional that she attacks a troll. However, it does seem that Walton thinks of the actual action as being the same as the fictional action: it is the action that is the point of articulation between worlds. In *Zork*, the actions are different: typing becomes fighting. But the player’s action still makes something fictional.

The rowing simulator I described in the previous chapter is much more unequivocally depictive than *Zork*, though the actions performed are not merely perceptual as they are in the examples Walton gives. Pulling an oar on the simulator is fictionally pulling an oar in a rowing boat. In an arcade game, pulling the trigger of a plastic gun may make it fictional that I pull the trigger of a (fictionally) real gun, fictionally shooting a bad guy dead. In these examples the correspondence is a lot more obvious than in *Zork*, but the principle is the same.

Dream Kitchen

Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs’s *Dream Kitchen* is an interactive artwork published on CD-ROM. It is described as *an interactive* on the back of the CD cover, and as a game in the options that appear when you press escape to quit it (Quit – Credits – New Game). However, *Dream Kitchen* is better described as a toy or a simulation than as a game. To play with *Dream Kitchen* is to explore the world and its carefully limited interface, rather as you would explore the possibilities of a new toy. As the title indicates, the world to be explored is that of a kitchen: pristine and tidy to begin

with but becoming more and more grubby and disgusting as the user pries into its unseen secrets.

The title screen shows an image of a starkly sterile kitchen with a rubber gloved hand holding a spray can labelled “Domestic Bliss”. There are no instructions to the user, and the hand is removed from the screen after a few seconds. Moving the mouse around the screen or clicking on the image of the kitchen gives no results until the mouse cursor is above the words “Dream Kitchen”. Hovering over these words, the cursor turns into the familiar hand with the pointing finger that indicates that clicking here will elicit some response from the computer. A click and the words buzz away like flies, and the kitchen is animated, or rather, our perspective on the kitchen is animated. The image swirls around the room as though the user were a fly buzzing from object to object: under the table, over to the fridge, up to the telephone that is hanging on the wall, across to the sink and down again in front of the stove before ducking under the table again to repeat the dizzy circle.

After a few rounds an alert user may notice that the mouse cursor promises action when hovering on certain key objects: the power socket behind the table, the fridge, the phone, the drain of the sink and the stove. Clicking on any one of these objects (there isn’t much time, you must click before you’ve moved on past it) sends you under or into it, and there is a separate event within each of these places. Once finished with the sequence or experience within one of these spaces the user returns to the kitchen, but the kitchen has changed. With each visit to the disturbing parallel universe that lies behind the glossy veneer of this kitchen, the benches, walls and appliances of this main room become dirtier. Traces of human inhabitants appear: a post-it note next to the phone, photos on the door of the fridge. With these human touches there is always grime: the circle left on the bench by a grubby bowl, a coffee cup with mould

growing around its edges, stripes of filth on the fridge and a dark red stain on the floor by the table that looks as though it could be blood.

Few options are given to the user, but those options become important, because the user's choice in *Dream Kitchen* is usually limited to accepting the offered role or abandoning the entire work. Some of the subworlds do present the user with toys to play with (shape a collage from the rubbish down the drain, or choose for how long you wish to electrocute the frog), but sequences of clicking are more common. The user moves through the fictional world in jerky movements from image to image, like in *Myst*. But here the links onward are often hidden. The user must find the hidden link by searching around the screen with the mouse, and must click the mouse in order to move on. In most cases, there is only one option, and the user must work in order to find it. Often it's unclear whether your clicking actually makes any difference at all – sometimes the action seems controlled by time as much as by your fervent clicking.

The blurb on the back cover of the CD states briefly that “The shift from dream to nightmare can be as sudden as the collapse of domestic bliss into chaos.” A sense of violence is present in most of the episodes that exist between the cracks of this perfect kitchen.

Behind the telephone there is an intricate system that folds and unfolds at the click of the user's mouse. A small green button lights up a grid of screens showing surveillance videos. The format is so small that it is difficult to see exactly what is happening, but there is a woman and a man and they are fighting. Something that looks like a gun is shown, and I think I hear a gunshot amid fragments of innocent-sounding telephone conversations: is the dark red stain on the floor blood from a murder? This may be the main story of *Dream Kitchen*, but it is never told directly. We glimpse it through surveillance tapes and may sense the deterioration of a relationship through the deterioration of the kitchen. Even stronger are the acts of violence and disrespect for

other creatures that the user herself commits in some of the other cracks in the facade of this kitchen. It seems safe to conclude that the whiff of “Domestic Bliss” sprayed by the blue-gloved hand in the title screen is not protection enough against the often unseen horrors of family life.

The surveillance tapes clearly frame a world that the user is unequivocally outside of. The user has no control over the world shown by the videos. This world can be seen as a framed story. It is formally a fiction within a fiction, but semantically it is presented as another interpretation or view of the same space.

In other episodes, the user directly causes violence through clicking the mouse, and this is where the user becomes part of the fictional world instead of merely watching it and exploring it without leaving any trace of herself. The episodes that force the user to be violent are the interactions that are particularly interesting in terms of depiction, ontological fusion and control.

One of these episodes takes place in the world underneath the fridge, where the user is cast as the executioner to a pen. The first images here show a labyrinth of small pieces of cardboard, and the pen (a fountain pen with a translucent red lid) is scuttering away from some biros that are pursuing it. The chase continues in new screens as the user finds the hidden clickable spot that opens a new scene. After a short while, pencils fill the screen, moving back and forwards like a crowd of humans. They make scuttling, scuffling noises, like mice, but listening carefully you can hear that the noises are really the sounds of pens and pencils moving against paper at different speeds. The pencils continue their shuffling until the user clicks, and this time the click brings a new object into being: a pen. New clicks make new pens magically appear, and these pens can be dragged around the screen, pushing the pencils aside.

So far we’ve seen three different kinds of user actions, in addition to the perceptual actions of looking and listening. Firstly, the user can click the mouse to move

around in the topology of the kitchen and its subworlds. The user's actual click of the mouse makes it fictional that the user moves through the fictional world. This movement seems somewhat academic so long as the user is simply an observer and not a participant, though it is, I suppose, no more academic than the inclusion of the viewer of Hobbema's mill painting in that fictional world, simply through the act of viewing. When this kind of movement is possible the mouse cursor turns into a pointing hand. Secondly, a click among the pencils calls an object into being in the fictional world. This is a powerful fictional action: a summoning or creation. However, the user has no control over this. The second or third time she clicks among the pencils she may have surmised that clicking is likely to generate another pen, but as there are no alternate actions available this hardly amounts to controlling the situation. Thirdly, the user can manipulate a fictional object by dragging the mouse while holding down the mouse button. This possibility is further exploited in the next segment of the pens and pencils episode.

The three functions of the user's clicking can be seen as requests from the user to the system. The first user action, the navigational click, asks to explore a certain area more closely. The second click summons rather than requests: "Make something happen *here*", the user says with her click. Though the user does not control *what* happens or *what* appears, she does decide where on the screen the summoned being shall materialize. The third click allows the user to temporarily possess a fictional being, and thereby to control its actions. Though the user's choices are extremely limited even here, the role the user plays is akin to that of a magician with the power to initiate action, summon beings and possess creatures. The work requires the user's presence and the user's action as paintings or music do not: without the user's clicking, the pens will not sacrifice the pencils. Yet for all this power, the magician-user can only work magic according to the script offered by the work. The user is both used and using.

Once the pens, controlled by the user, have pushed away all the pencils, a new scene follows. Two biros dance with a pencil, then lift the pencil between them. They proceed to push it into a pencil sharpener. At first they seem to be helpfully sharpening the pencil, but the sharpening continues until there is nothing left of the pencil at all. The pens repeat this sacrifice using a new pencil, and then another, and another, until the user at some point realises that she can stop the slaughter of pencils by clicking the pencil sharpener. The sharpenings fall down and the next scene shows them gathered into a piled heap. Biros stand cheering behind the heap, and the red-capped fountain pen is brought in and placed on this bonfire of pencil shavings (see Figure 3).

It takes the user eight clicks of the mouse and some dragging and dropping to light the match and set fire to the bonfire of pencil shavings. Then the user is left to watch the pen twist in melting agony as a crowd of other pens and pencils cheer in the background.

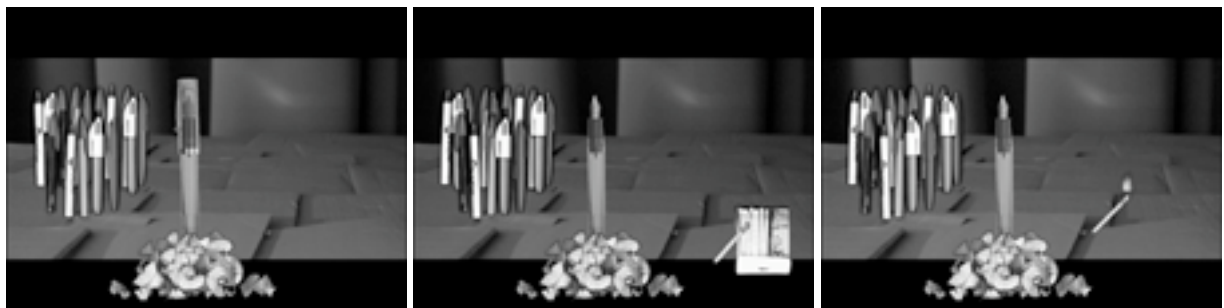


Figure 3 Lighting the bonfire in Dream Kitchen. Moving the mouse moves the match, so to light the match, the user strikes it against the match book.

If the user doesn't click (and of course you do; you're curious to see what happens next, you want something, anything to happen) the image is eventually replaced by the title screen and the work starts all over again.

In this scene, the user is forced not simply to enact burning a pen at the stake, but to make each step towards that burning fictional. Each click is a tiny step along this path. The matchbook must be opened, a match must be taken from it, the match must be lit, then it must be touched to the pencil shavings.

The obedience of the user is a central theme of *Dream Kitchen*. In the episode that takes place beneath the stove, this becomes even more explicit than in the pencil burning episode. Once past another labyrinth of cardboard, the user is presented with a dark space in which three small animals are placed on pedestals. Another click sets up a situation that the user can play with by combining elements in various ways. The user is provided with a scalpel, an x-ray panel and wires for electrocution that can be applied to each of the animals as the user wishes. At first it is not obvious what any of the three torture devices do: the user must use each device on an animal in order to see its function. The animals are for the most part dead, and so these dissections may appear harmless – except for the rat. Its front paw is disturbing enough as it moves up and down in repetitive spasms. You see worse when you move the x-ray panel across its body. Inside the rat's belly is a glowing, pink human foetus, heart beating just as in the images we've seen on television documentaries and books about pregnancy.

Torturing these animals has no immediate repercussions. Electrocution makes the animals twitch and high-pitched squeals can be heard against the electrical hum as the current flows through them, but the electricity does not burn them. Afterwards they look exactly the same.

Even the foetus inside the rat is unchanged. Its heart still beats no matter how long you electrocute its host. Slicing up the belly of the rat with the scalpel neither reveals nor kills the foetus. The human foetus can only be seen using the x-ray panel. In *Dream Kitchen* humans are never directly accessible, but are only visible through technological mediation: the surveillance videos from behind the telephone and the x-ray panel in the dissection chamber. The computer and the fictional bugs and animate pens and scraps of rubbish block communication between the human user and the fictional humans of the *Dream Kitchen* world. Is this foetus the child of the couple we

saw fighting in the surveillance tapes? Then we are participating in the destruction of this family by our interaction with the work. We are complicit in their misery.

Once the user is satisfied with her slicing, x-raying and electrocution, she can leave the dissection chamber by clicking a thin strip of white at the top of the screen. Once clicked, the strip lengthens, revealing itself to be a printout of the results of the experiments the user has just performed – but now we see that it is the user who was the test subject, rather than the lab animals. The user has just been the subject of an “Obedience to Interface Test”, and she is rated according to her obedience, sensitivity, obsessiveness, cruelty and impatience. The user’s apparent control is inverted by the score card and its declaration that rather than the user using the work, the work is using the user.



Figure 4: A score card awarded to the user after torturing bugs and other in Dream Kitchen.

The role available to the user and the actions that the user is required to perform raise issues of ethics and control. Like *afternoon* and *Zork*, *Dream Kitchen* requires user actions that translate into fictional actions in the fictional world. In *afternoon* and *Zork* the relationship between user and work is important to a full understanding of the work, but in *Dream Kitchen* it is essential. Here the role the user enters into *vis a vis* the work reflects back on the user herself. As a user of *Dream Kitchen* I am left not only interpreting the work but interpreting myself and my own disturbing actions.

Deixis

The term *deixis* is borrowed from linguistics, and refers to the quality of language that emphasises the relationship between speaker and listener rather than the content of what is being said. Following this, deictic works emphasise the relationship between user and work rather than what happens in the fictional world. This does not mean that the events in the fictional world are unimportant, but simply that there is also an emphasis on the relationship between the user and that world, or between the user and the material text.

Dream Kitchen emphasises the deixis between user and work very strongly because the user's actual actions correspond directly to fictional actions. Mieke Bal's discussion of deictic narratives (Bal 1999), from which I have taken my use of the term deictic, extends the conventional narratological definition of narrative to include events that occur between the user and the work. This is highly relevant to interactive works.

Bal is a narratologist who has turned her attention to visual art in recent years. In her book on Caravaggio, she explores non-representational ways of narrating; "narrating outside of figuration", as she describes it (167). She stretches conventional notions of narrativity, for instance identifying the narrative dimension of Caravaggio's work as being "its appeal to an interaction with the viewer, to its own processing in

time” (167). Bal describes a form of narrative that lies in the relationship between the viewer and the work rather than in the work itself. Though “at least two related events much be involved for a work to be called narrative in more than just metaphorical terms” (176), for Bal these events need not be *represented* events. Her interpretation of David Reed’s non-figurative paintings as narrative makes use of such extra-textual events:

Instead of marking the canvas with visible traces of paint and paint handling, he offers a surface so smooth and shiny that the eye, as Hanne Loreck puts it, "bounces off it". Thus the two events required to make up a minimal narrative are already in place even in so simple and primary a reading: the eye goes to the canvas, then bounces back. (180)

Bal sees these “events of perception” that are performed by the viewer as exceeding vision alone. The “dynamic between the I and the you [is] grounded in a sense-based attraction that is not limited to vision” (181). She writes:

As tyrannical as love itself, the painted surface dictates how the "second person" must confirm the first person's subjectivity, the kind of subjectivity it wishes to be produced and hence how the viewer must be engaged: not as a bare, abstract, theoretical, disembodied retina, but as a full participant in a visual event in which the body takes effect. The second-personhood I am elaborating here, then, is qualified as erotic so as to ensure this bodily participation. This bodily participation takes time, and the subject performing it changes through time. This is a definition of an event. (188-189)

Bal sees this exchange between the I and the you, the viewer and the viewed, as fundamentally deictic, and akin to the subjectification of which Benveniste (1971) speaks as occurring in this exchange between first and second person:

Thus the light defines the surface as moving toward the outside world where the viewer is, begging the latter to confirm its subjectivity so that the viewer, saying "you" to the surface, can come into his status as a bodily engaged "I". (195)

Though I am not convinced that it is useful to think of such an interchange between viewer and art as narrative, I find Bal’s discussion of the way in which certain artworks stress this relationship valuable. Bal is describing an aspect of a work that is neither part of a fictional world being represented, nor part of the medium itself, nor part of the discourse. Rather it is similar to what Gérard Genette identifies as the narrating

situation, the third aspect of his triad of *histoire* (story), *discours* (discourse) and *narration* (the first two will be discussed in chapter 5):

The third aspect is the *narrating situation* itself, whose two protagonists are the narratee – present, absent, or implied – and the narrator. The function that concerns the narrator's orientation toward the narratee – his care in establishing or maintaining with the narratee a contact, indeed, a dialogue (actual, as in *La Maison Nucingen*, or fictive, as in *Tristram Shandy*) – recalls both Jakobsen's "phatic" (verifying the contact) and his "conative" (acting on the receiver) functions. Rogers calls narrators of the Shandian type, always turned towards their public and often more interested in the relationship they maintain with that public than in their narrative itself, "raconteurs". (Genette 1980: 256)

For Genette, thoroughly grounded in a print culture, a reader cannot speak back, and therefore a narrator who speaks directly to the reader, as *Tristram Shandy* does, must be fictive. When the reader can speak back and have a voice of her own, the quality of this dialogue shifts radically. Board games, theatrical performances, oral story-telling and other non-print forms of text or narrative have emphasised the deictic relationship between speakers and audience to a far greater degree than printed texts.

Bal's presentation of deictic narratives presents an approach to understanding the relationship between user and work that is different to that I have presented using Walton and Pavel. Walton's concept of depiction and the correspondence between the user's actual and fictional actions, combined with Pavel's ontological fusion, gives us a practical tool for understanding certain kinds of interactivity. Bal's discussion of deictic narrative gives us an appreciation that an artwork may emphasise its relationship with its user more than the content it portrays. The depiction itself may be more important than that which is depicted.

Comparing interactions

Afternoon, *Zork* and *Dream Kitchen* are works with very clear differences. *Afternoon* is literary and for the most part only allows the user to explore its textual fragments rather than positioning the user as part of the fictional world. The question "Do you want to hear about it?" is the only direct address to the user (apart from the instructions on how

to read the work) and it is here we see the depictive elements that Walton describes in non-interactive representational works. The user's response to the question in *afternoon*, whether it is to press return, click a chance word on the screen, or to answer yes or no, is also a fictional action. It does not draw us right into the story of the car crash, the ex-wife and the lovers, but into the frame narrative where Peter tells his story. This is an extra-diegetic level that frames the main narrative.

When the reader answers the question, the reader is drawn into the narration of the story. The question and its answer emphasise the telling itself, and as in Bal's deictic narrative, the reader's actions in relation to the work become events in themselves. Peter tells the story of his afternoon to the reader, and this narration could itself be retold as a narrative that includes the reader complete with events ordered causally: "Peter began to tell me his story, and then asked whether I wanted to hear about it. I said yes, and *therefore* he told me more." This narrative is never *told* within *afternoon*. It is not represented, it is enacted or made possible, as in a game or a simulation. This is the deictic aspect of *afternoon*.

Dream Kitchen also requires the user's participation, yet the constant clicks it demands are better described as illusions of choice than as genuine choice. The user is usually only able to choose between action and inaction, and inaction is to leave the work completely, or just watch it cycle dully through a small sequence again and again, never progressing. And yet the relentless demand that the user click situates the user as the controller of what happens. Though the choices are limited to one course of action, taking that course is still a choice. One could leave the artwork. As Lev Manovich and others have pointed out, "making a choice involves a moral responsibility" {Manovich, 2001 #104@44}. In *Dream Kitchen* the user's actions translate directly to cruel, fictional actions. This makes the user complicit in a completely different way to the reader of a novel that describes bestial murders. The reader remains outside of the

fictional world and is a mere onlooker to something that (in most novels, which are narrated after the fictional event) fictionally has already happened. The user of *Dream Kitchen* performs actions that make her part of the fictional world. She becomes complicit in the horrors of that fictional world.

Ontological interaction

Depiction is not a sufficient word for the interaction I am describing here. Walton's description of how depiction works in non-digital representations, combined with Pavel's discussion of ontological fusion, is the foundation for understanding this kind of interactivity, but we must take it one step further. I propose that we call interaction where the user's actual actions directly correspond to fictional actions *ontological interaction*. This term has been used by Marie-Laure Ryan in a sense that is almost compatible with my use of the word, but she arrives at it through other means (Ryan 2001a). Ryan defines ontological interaction as interaction where the user is able to change something in the fictional world, and opposes it to exploratory interaction. In exploratory interaction, the user navigates through the fictional world but does not change it. I see Ryan's and my understandings of ontological interaction as corresponding to Walton's depictive representation, where the user is included in the fictional world, and exploratory interaction corresponds to Walton's descriptive representation, where the user remains outside of the fiction. Ryan couples this pair with another duality, internal and external interaction. I shall return to this in chapter 5.

I define ontological interaction slightly differently to Ryan. For Ryan, ontological interaction occurs when the user is able to affect events or situations in the fictional world. I instead wish to focus on the user's position: in ontological interaction, the user is positioned within the fictional world. The positioning of the user inside the fictional

world happens through the same mechanism as Walton describes in depiction: the user's actual actions directly correspond to fictional actions in the fictional world. When the user's actual actions correspond directly to fictional actions, the user becomes the site of an ontological fusion between actual and fictional, and it is this that makes us feel immersed.

Janet Murray also touches upon this, arriving by different means at a similar conclusion in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, where she describes a *Star Trek* game where the user must manipulate various objects in order to free a scientist from under a heavy pipe:

Operating the tricorder and the transporter in this way – which really only means clicking the mouse here and there on some unspectacular screen graphics – makes the world of the game seem much more present than does the same world on *Starship Enterprise*, the more visually impressive CD-ROM. It is the experience of using the objects and seeing them work as they are supposed to in our hands that creates the feeling of being part of the *Star Trek* world. (Murray 1997: 111-112)

The theories of ontological fusion and depiction can explain *how* and *why* this occurs. Although some may feel immersion more readily through the complicated manipulation of objects, it is not the complexity of the tasks or the exact nature of the objects manipulated that causes the perception of being part of the fictional world. It is the equivalence between actual action and fictional action.

As I have shown in the discussion of *Dream Kitchen*, being positioned inside the fictional world and thus being able to perform actual actions that translate to fictional actions needn't give the user any real control over the fictional world. The user's actions may not affect the outcome of the story or the presentation of the fictional situation. In *Dream Kitchen*, the user's experiments with the bugs and the rat do not change anything in the fictional world, but still position the user within that world.

Ontological interactivity thus can be seen as a subcategory of depictive works. While a depictive work, such as Hobbema's painting of a mill, requires perceptual actions from users and these actions translate into fictional actions, a work that is

ontologically interactive requires actions that go beyond perception. In addition, the user's actions in relation to interactive works generate feedback from the work. When I click the screen in *Dream Kitchen* a pen appears. In this sense I do affect the fictional world by my interaction, but this is trivial given that there is no other option available to me but to click a pen into being or to quit interacting. When I type "kill troll" in *Zork*, the game responds. Here my interaction does change the fictional world. When I look at Hobbema's painting, the painting does nothing. I imagine myself to be present in the fictional world but do not affect it.

In Rob Bevan and Tim Wright's web serial *Online Caroline* (Bevan and Wright 2000) the user is staged as Caroline's friend, and constantly gives advice and answers questions by clicking and typing. The next chapter is a reading of *Online Caroline*, in which an understanding of ontological fusion, fictionality as make-believe, depiction and interaction can help us understand how we engage with works such as these. *Online Caroline* also uses ontological interaction, positioning the user as Caroline's friend and confidante, and as in *Dream Kitchen*, the user becomes complicit in foul play without having any choice in the matter. Power and force thus become central.

CHAPTER 3 **FEEDING ONLINE**

CAROLINE

I connect my computer to the network, sipping my morning coffee. My hair is still wet from the shower when I check my email and find it there in between other messages: an email from Caroline. I read it quickly and then visit her web site. She's waiting for me. She holds a shirt she's just bought up to the webcam so I can see it, asking me afterwards by email whether I'd like her to send it to me. "Yes", I answer, clicking and typing my responses into a web form and giving her my physical address. Caroline knows I like coffee and she knows I read her email in the morning. Caroline and I are friends.

Of course, Caroline isn't actually real. She's the fictional protagonist in a 24 part online drama called *Online Caroline*. The web site and emails are written and designed by Rob Bevan and Tim Wright, and the actress Mira Dovreni plays Caroline's part in the pre-recorded webcam sequences. You can be Caroline's friend too if you go to her web site: <<http://www.onlinecaroline.com>>.

This chapter is about my relationship with Caroline. Caroline permeates my everyday life in a way that is unlike other fictional characters. I don't have to switch on the TV or pick up a book and start reading to engage in this fiction. Once I've signed up for it, it comes to me. It knows where I am and what I like and how I read. If I don't visit for a few days, Caroline complains. I'm bound to this narrative.

Personalised narrative

Caroline is a young woman who worries about her boyfriend David, her friends, her weight and her job. David is away on research in New Guinea, and his employers, XPT, have provided Caroline with a web site and equipment so she can find online friends –

like me – to keep her company while David’s away. A week into our friendship, David returns and the story becomes more sinister. He coerces Caroline into following an outlandish diet, making her the guinea pig in an experiment that appears to be connected to XPT and to David’s own research. Within days, Caroline is feeble and ill. In the final week of the serial, David takes over the web site bit by bit, until Caroline’s only voice is in her ever-shortening emails. The story ends as Caroline is silenced, and can send me no more emails. Instead, I receive an email from XPT, thanking me for my assistance.



Figure 5: Screenshot of main page on day 2. Caroline has made dinner for two.

This synopsis doesn’t say much about how the story is told, and it is this telling that makes reading (or playing) *Online Caroline* a very new experience. *Online Caroline* is a

story told to and, importantly, *with* its reader. It's built around a database that collects the information I feed it as I read. I answer questions about myself and the program uses that information to generate personalised emails from Caroline to me. When I visit Caroline's web site the version I see depends on how much of the story I've read. Each day I'm limited to one episode consisting of an email and the appropriate version of the web site. The site has a daily webcam segment, a regularly updated diary section and other pages typical of a personal home page: photos of her house and her boyfriend and so on. It takes me a minimum of 24 days to experience the drama, spending five or ten minutes on each day's episode. If I visit the site less than daily it will be spread out over more time.

The personalisation generated by the database that backs this system is a major narrative technique in *Online Caroline*. We're more familiar with this manner of seamless adjustment to the user's behaviour in marketing than in art, narratives or games. Companies harvest information about us and target ads to our demographic information. Amazon.com suggests books and kitchen gadgets it thinks I'll like based on the last books I've viewed, or on books my friends like, as well as on my own deliberate ratings and preferences. Amazon.com and other commercial sites also allow me to make some of my own choices. I can search for a book that it hasn't suggested to me. Most of the time, the computer system's suggestions line the margins of the page, allowing my deliberate choices to take centre stage. The computer-generated recommendations even masquerade as being my choices rather than the system's with names like "The page that you made" and "Jill's store". Systems like Amazon's interpret my actions constantly to determine what I see on my screen, but they frame their interpretations of my behaviour (their recommendations) as extra, non-essential, marginal information, emphasising my role as chooser and not just as a consumer.

Many games and hypertext fictions give the impression of only reacting to our deliberate choices, and not to our automatic actions, actions that are so routine we're not aware of them. *Online Caroline* tips the balance the other way by allowing readers no deliberate choices and by tracking their automatic actions, making automatic actions we take for granted and don't perceive as part of the work of reading suddenly become visible. Making visible that which we take for granted is not a new strategy in art. The Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century found this to be one of the most important functions of literature (Shklovsky 1988: 20-21).

What follows is not a complete analysis of *Online Caroline*. I want to study the role that is provided for the reader, and to see how the reader is led through particular actions. As in *davidstill.org* and *Bino & Cool's Masterclass*, the user of *Online Caroline* is made part of the system that is modelled. Here, the system modelled is that of a friendship. Setting *Online Caroline* in the context of epistolary fiction, I examine the similarities between the two dominant relationships in *Online Caroline*: that of David and Caroline and that of Caroline and the reader. I argue that David's increasingly explicit control of Caroline is a parallel to the text's increasingly explicit control of the reader.

Evolving

Caroline changes throughout the serial, and the story revolves around this change: how is she changing and why? What causes it? What is the purpose? Why doesn't she resist it?

David puts Caroline on a diet. At first it seems that the diet is for her health. Thin as she is, she's fairly neurotic about her weight and she willingly goes along with the peculiar diet, which consists of "marrow, tomatoes, aubergine (American), broccoli, pineapple, porcelain, vitamin C, folic acid, cod liver oil and alcohol blended and drunk

from a metal container”. It tastes awful, judging from the look on her face when she drinks it. David is also on a diet, but the reader hears less about it than about Caroline’s. David’s diet seems to be a lot more lenient than hers, allowing pizza and Chinese take-away, which I watch him eating on the web cam as Caroline stares wistfully at these forbidden foods.

As Caroline changes, her web site also changes. The round, friendly fonts Caroline used in her design are replaced by David’s capitalised, formal titles. His language is technical and exact, and a stark contrast to Caroline’s inclusive, chatty tone. “My stuff” becomes “Objects”, “Send me things: shower me with gifts, why don’t you?” has become “Give and take: Items for 1st level receivers”. By episode 20, the web cam is labelled “Guinea pig”, “What I’m playing” has become “Aural stimulus”, and even the text under the web cam is written by David rather than by Caroline herself. He still uses the same font as Caroline did for this diary section, but the tone is very different. David has taken over her web site, bit by bit.

ONLINE CAROLINE

GUINEA PIG OBJECTS BIOGRAPHY ENVIRONMENT

GIVE AND TAKE
+ ITEMS FOR 1ST LEVEL RECEIVERS...

COLOUR AND WARMTH
+ DO WE NEED CLOTHES?

SPEECH PATTERNS
+ NEW VOICES ARE CHANGING...

SEND YOUR DATA
+ RECORD YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES...

4 Feb 2001 16:30:25 GMT

ANT SHOW

Dietary Conditioning: the New Social Science. YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT.

The environment is changing. My voice is changing. You can hear it in 'Speech Patterns'.

AURAL STIMULUS (David's ~~music~~ music)

Note how music can change your mood.

Track 4 - Physical Graffiti - Led Zeppelin

YOU DECODE... Caroline eats:

Too much Too little Enough

Figure 6 Main page of web site, day 19. David has taken over entirely.

Caroline's change has to do with her relationship to David and with both their relationships to XPT. David's experiments are intended to make Caroline into a "receiver". It's never quite clear exactly what that means, but it seems that other people, called the givers, somehow control a receiver. David wants to be a giver, and his diet and the way he dresses (orange and purple; no trousers) is supposed to help him change to fit this role. But David himself may be being manipulated by XPT. On the webcam I see two XPT employees slip something into David's drink when he's not looking. Perhaps they're making him into a receiver too? In addition, Caroline tells me (or rather, she

tells my characters “Jill” and “Jack”) that David wants to experiment on me as well. On the web site, he explains that he wants me to follow the same diet that Caroline is on.

The theme of control is constant, both in the relationships between Caroline, David and XPT and in the relationship between the user and the work and the user and Caroline. There is a constant movement between playing and being played, between being made a pawn and allowing oneself to be a pawn.

Viewer and viewed

The rules I must follow to stick with *Online Caroline* are unarticulated, but they are simple and unchanging. I can only speak when spoken to. Only a few responses are permitted. My role is that of the confidante. My function is simply to allow the heroine to speak. In the first episodes of the story, Caroline asks me to tell her more about myself, “so that we can really be friends”, and she provides me with a convenient web form to fill out my details. I answer truthfully or not as I please, though I’m limited to set options: I can only choose to call Caroline funny, sad or boring, I can’t type my own word. In the right hand column are Caroline’s own responses.

I think Caroline is funny sad boring funny

Figure 7 Excerpt from the second "about you" page.

The responses I’m allowed to give are more in the manner of an active listener than of an equal partner in a conversation. Often my input has the tone of a sympathetic “me too” or an “I prefer X”. Caroline always sets the agenda.

Nationality	<input type="text"/>	English/Greek
My mother is	<input checked="" type="radio"/> alive <input type="radio"/> dead	alive
I travel	<input checked="" type="radio"/> a lot <input type="radio"/> a little <input type="radio"/> not at all	a little
My favourite colour is	<input type="text"/>	purple

Figure 8 Excerpt from the first "about you" page.

The questions remind me of conversations with girlfriends where a relationship is strengthened by these little comparisons and affirmations, and where advice is asked for and given as a token of empathy, though neither of us expects it to be followed. For instance, the questions after the ones shown above are as follows:

I think Sophie slept with David last year	<input checked="" type="radio"/> yes <input type="radio"/> no	so do I
I think sleeping with Simon would be the perfect revenge	<input type="radio"/> yes <input type="radio"/> no	do I have to?

Figure 9 Excerpt from the first "about you" page.

The options offered here are as few and as stereotypical as the characterisation of Caroline herself. It's worth noting, too, that the reader isn't actually asked to answer questions, but to complete statements by typing in a missing word or choosing between two or three options. Even at this level, the reader is locked within a constricted structure. It is impossible to respond "outside the box".

These statements that the reader fills out are balanced by the right hand column, where Caroline's responses are. She has not been limited to filling out the blanks as the reader is, and often gives answers that aren't options for the reader. Her responses are written in the authoritative font of the site, anti-aliased, dark blue and in bold, while the reader's font is monospaced, black and thin. The reader is given a font of the sort commonly used in emails, drafts and web forms, while Caroline's font is the kind used

in glossy designer web sites. The power balance is clear: Caroline is in charge and the reader follows her. Caroline is permanent while the reader is an exchangeable partner in this dance: filling in these forms I present myself as data streamlined to fit into preset categories.

My responses affect the emails Caroline writes to me. In one of my first visits, I told the database that I have a daughter. The next morning I found an email from Caroline where she wrote:

There was me banging on about not liking children, and then discovering you're already a parent. Ah well, you still came back for more. (email no. 4 to "Jill")

She knew I had a daughter! I felt as though the fiction was adjusting to me, changing itself according to my input and qualities. I decided to see how Caroline would react to a different kind of reader. So I started over, using a different email address and inventing a reader I called Jack, making him the opposite of my original character, who had been an honest rendition of my real self.

But the emails barely changed, and Caroline's response to Jack the childless bachelor shows how changing a phrase needn't change the story at all:

There was me banging on about children, when you don't have any. Ah well, you still came back for more. (Email no. 4 to "Jack")

Another place I can speak up is in the "You decide" box that appears underneath the webcam image each day. On the eighth day of the serial Caroline is anguishing over how upset David will be when he discovers that some parcels of his have been stolen. The title for the day's "You decide" section is "The great parcel crisis". Caroline wants advice on what to do about the stolen parcels. I can choose between three options by clicking in the appropriate box: "Tell David", "Avoid David" or "Leave David". Caroline doesn't take my advice though, whether I'm Jill who thinks she should leave David or Jack, who thinks she should tell him. Whichever choice I make the web page refreshes to show me the same sentence: "You need to know more about David, I think." Next morning my

characters Jack and Jill receive almost identical emails. Although Jack told Caroline to tell David about the stolen parcels while Jill told her to leave the brute, only a few words in the email are different:

I do love David. And I want to be straight with him about that parcel business, as you suggested.

I do love David. And I want to be straight with him about that parcel business. (So I won't be leaving him as you suggested!).

Though my deliberate actions and responses as a reader do evoke responses from the text, their influence on the story is trivial. William Cole comes to the same conclusion in a short paper analysing *Online Caroline*: “In each case, the responses are substantially different in detail, but *narratively* they serve identical functions.” (Cole 2001: 70) Some readers become upset at Caroline’s refusal to take the advice she asks for, feeling cheated by a narrative that appears to promise to listen to you but doesn’t (see page 77). But Caroline never promises anything. She asks for the reader to be her friend and confidante. I am required to be an active listener who shows empathy by responding, but not an equal partner with an agenda of my own.

As the plot advances, it becomes clear that *Online Caroline’s* system is watching me in more than these explicit ways. I realise that the program knows more about me than I have deliberately told it. It’s not only reacting to my deliberate responses and answers, but also to my silent wanderings around the web site itself. In email no. 14, Caroline writes:

You’ve convinced him that you’re interested in his theories, because you took a look at the “My Boyfriend” section again last time you came. You shouldn’t encourage him.

My actions as a reader don’t just evoke a response from the text, they seem to affect the story, even to make me complicit in what happens. Interestingly, my deliberate responses are presented as having less influence on the plot than movements that I had thought were unseen. Here I am told that by the very act of reading, I’m encouraging David in his imprisonment of Caroline. Following this serial doesn’t feel like “just

watching” or “just reading”. It feels as though I may be partially responsible for what’s happening in this simulated world.

My complicity in David’s abuse of Caroline implicates me in another way as well: Caroline tells me that David wants to use *me* as a guinea pig in his experiment. The fictional avatar I’ve created called Jill (or Jack), is thus at risk from David and XPT.

Outside the fiction, the real me is also at risk. To be allowed to read this story I’ve given the database a lot of information about myself: some deliberate, some incidental. *Online Caroline* would be the perfect marketing tool for gathering demographics: what readers like to eat, buy, do, their family situation and so on. In addition, the system has demonstrated that it’s tracking more than just my responses to its questions: it will know my computer, my operating system, my browser, my screen resolution, my IP-number and what time of day I do my websurfing, among other things. Imagine a sequel to *Online Caroline* written as a computer virus targeted to hit previous readers of the series. David might indeed continue his experiments, perhaps by purging my actual computer of unwanted files so that I could become a pure recipient for his projects.

There are levels of risk and guilt within the story and outside it. Caroline wants my data so she can get to know me as a friend. Behind that, pulling the strings but still within the fiction, is XPT, who presumably would like to know more about me, or rather about Jack and Jill. They may want to make Caroline’s narratees into receivers too. In the real world, Freeserve, the company who produced *Online Caroline*, may want to sell my information as market statistics.

Is she flirting with me?

One of the first questions Caroline asks me is whether I’m male or female. I truthfully answered female the first time I signed up, as “Jill”. I experienced our relationship as that of two girlfriends, with standard chatting about boyfriends and clothes and jobs

and friends. Hearing that men who followed the serial often felt that Caroline was flirting with them, I decided to use a second character, “Jack”, to see whether Caroline was programmed to act differently with a man than with a woman. Nothing in the emails or website changed based on the gender I told Caroline I was. And yet some readers see flirting while others see mere chatting.

Online Caroline is written to be open enough to allow the reader to fill in the blanks. Caroline is presented as a heterosexual woman in her twenties, very close to the stereotypical image of slightly neurotic urban women that we see portrayed in popular television sitcoms like *Friends* or *Sex and the City* or in the novel and film *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. It is easy to dismiss *Online Caroline* for its superficiality and its stereotypes. The serial feels a lot like a soap opera, in style and content, although it develops into something more like a conspiracy theory serial or a mockumentary like *The Blair Witch Project*. However, the simple, flat, stereotypical characterisation of Caroline may be necessary in order to leave her open enough to allow a reader to project themselves into her life, imagining themselves her friend.

Being a heterosexual woman, I fill in those blanks in Caroline’s character and in my own self-presentation so they will suit my expectations of a relationship between girls talking about boyfriends and work and emotions. I take her requests for advice in the same spirit as I do those of my real life girl friends. They rarely want to be told what to do, no, they want confirmation of what they’re already intending to do. Caroline reacts exactly as I expect her to when she refuses to leave or shoot David, though I tell her she should. She would have been stepping outside the “girlfriend” role I expect her to follow if she’d done as I said. And as a good girlfriend, I stick by her though I think

she's a fool. I keep listening, and I keep sharing some of my experiences (my favourite colour is blue/red/orange) to show her I'm listening².

If you take the role of a heterosexual man you might interpret Caroline's relationship to you quite differently. Male friends of mine who've followed the serial report feeling that Caroline is flirting with them. Some readers express anger at being "tricked" by Caroline – either when they found that she was fictional and not real (Armstrong 2000) or when she doesn't follow their advice, as "promised". William Cole discusses Caroline's betrayal thus:

By gesturing at obeying the reader's instructions, Caroline briefly promises the reader real power over the outcome of the narrative. Just as quickly, however, the promise is withdrawn. (..) Indeed, it seems that the main point of this episode is to create friction between Caroline and the reader, to show her resisting the reader's advice and questioning his or her conception of her. (Cole 2001: 70)

The words used in this description echo the experience of flirtation, sexuality and power: "obey", "promises", "power", "withdrawn", "friction", "resisting", "conception". They sketch a picture of expectations of the traditional relationship between a man and a woman: the man instructs, the woman promises to obey. Cole believes there is a promise which is broken, and is frustrated with this. The promise is that of true interactivity, where the reader has more than trivial influence on the story, but this interactivity is illusory and turns out to be mere personalisation. The reader is denied control over the narrative. Cole concludes that *Online Caroline* doesn't fulfil the "ambitious claims" that have been made for hypertext, where readers were expected to become "the kind of co-creators that hypertext theory has postulated" (70).

Caroline becomes an emblem for the text itself. She is the text who flirts with the reader, seduces him and then capriciously refuses to give that which the reader believes she has promised him. The text is like a seductive woman and the reader hopes to be a

² Thank you to Elin Sjørnsen and Lisbeth Klastrup for first suggesting this interpretation based on women's friendships to me in conversations at *Hypertext 2001* in Århus.

conqueror, but the affair ends with disappointment: the text becomes a tease and the reader is thwarted, unfairly led along, cast aside. It is a subversion of “the objectifying gaze of the camera”, which film theorists have argued renders women in films as nothing but objects to be looked at and owned (Modleski 1988). Here, Caroline is interpreted as promising not only to be looked at but also to be instructed, commanded. Finally, she both succumbs to David’s control and ignores the reader’s attempts to control her. The user and David are rivals.

Other readers have experienced similar disappointment and anger when they discover that Caroline is not real. Steven Armstrong, a journalist, wrote an article on *Online Caroline* in the Sunday Times:

We'd had this quite intense relationship after I stumbled on her webcam site, so I felt I should tell her to watch out. But then David started intercepting my e-mails, so she thought I wasn't speaking to her, and I couldn't reach her and I thought she was going to die.

I contacted my mate Richard, who I knew had been e-mailing Caroline as well because he'd pointed her website out to me, and it turned out he'd dealt with this identical crisis two days earlier. He'd already moved on and everything had got much, much worse. Then it dawned on us. This wasn't real life. Caroline was part of some twisted internet entertainment - and we'd been suckered. (Armstrong 2000)

Readers are involved in this online drama; they feel part of the story. Cole wanted to control the story – he wanted Caroline to listen to him. Armstrong wanted to look after Caroline and rescue her. When they are shown that they are in fact only readers, or receivers to use David’s sinister term, they feel cheated, maybe even violated. Perhaps this anger is related to our need to believe in our own reality. When we discover we have no real influence on the story, we realise that we have been caught, trapped as figments of Caroline’s imagination, as Alice was in the Red King’s dream:

“Only I do hope it’s *my* dream, and not the Red King’s! I don’t like belonging to another person’s dream,” she went on in a rather complaining tone: “I’ve a great mind to go and wake him, and see what happens!” (Carroll 1960: 293)

Interacting with Caroline implies the risk of losing yourself, of being taken captive. As Armstrong writes, “you might end up being trapped in her sinister web” (Armstrong

2000). In this text the reader is written into the story. The personalisation makes the reader feel she or he is a participant of the relationship with Caroline. The user becomes the site of ontological fusion between Caroline's fictional world and the actual world: reading *Online Caroline*, I am both in the fiction and in actuality. Playing "ourselves" in this relationship, we take our own person into the text and thereby interpret Caroline's actions as intended for us. Reading that intentionality into her gives different results depending on your interests, and it seems, depending on your gender.

Just as *Gulliver's Travels* as a whole is a depiction of a ship's logbook (see page 42), and thus itself enacts a fictional object of the world it prescribes, the website *Online Caroline* is an exact depiction of the fictional website that XPT fictionally have made for Caroline to help her communicate with her online friends. Similarly, the actions I perform when exploring this website and answering Caroline's questions precisely correspond to the fictional actions in the fictional world where I am Caroline's online friend. I become a member of both actual and fictional worlds through my actions. When I actually eagerly check my email to see if there's anything from Caroline, I am also fictionally eagerly checking my email to see if there's anything from Caroline. When I ring the phone number given in an email, I am fictionally ringing Caroline. I'm not translating drums to cannons as I am when I listen to the 1812 Overture. The depiction is so exact that it is more like the strong fusion between sacred and actual, that Pavel describes (see page 36) than the weaker bond between fictional and actual.

Captivity

Caroline nicknames the recipient of her emails Bluebird. "Bonjour mon petit oiseau bleu", she writes upon returning from Paris. When my character Jack didn't visit the site for a couple of weeks, she wrote to tell him how she'd always be there if he missed her, opening her letter "Darling Bluebird, you've flown away." At one point she writes

what seems to be a code on the tiles of her bathroom wall, shaping toy foam letters into the words "XPT", "Paris" and "bluebird", letting me and XPT know she's gone to Paris.

Whatever name and attributes I tell Caroline's database are mine, the text thinks of me as Bluebird. On the level of code, Bluebird might be a variable, a name that can point to many different contents. My personal details are exchangeable attributes attached to a record in a database. The "about you" web forms I fill in are visualisations of this: entering my data into empty slots.

Caroline has few friends and little contact with the world. She becomes more and more cut off from the world in the course of the story. We read about and see her "best friend" Sophie, who becomes absent from the webcam scenes after having a baby, and we see Simon a couple of times, but Caroline doesn't tell us of any other friends. She barely mentions leaving her flat at all. We do hear about a couple of shopping sprees and a quick trip to Paris but most of the time she seems to stay indoors. After David's return, even these brief excursions cease, leaving her emails and the website as her only contact with the world. One day, in her diary, she writes, "With TV and you I never have to go outside again." I have become her entire world.

Being her world, I'm also her captive, just as the blue budgie she keeps in a cage. I've been appropriated by the text, and I play the role it has given to me. In addition, the text locks my and Caroline's world in a present, much as I am locked in my role of confidante and obedient listener. I can look at "our diary", a page with thumbnails of all the webcam videos I've seen on previous visits, and from there I can replay any of these. But the site changes with every visit, and once it's changed, there's no way I can go back and look at the way it was yesterday without signing up as a different character and going through each episode again. There's no way to fast forward through the episodes either, because only one new episode becomes available each day. So I can't reach into the future, as I sometimes do skipping pages in a novel, I actually have to wait. My

reading irrevocably moves the text forward, and I can't go back. My only way of controlling the time of the reading is if I refuse to read, thus keeping the text at a standstill.

Every word in a novel is accessible to me at any time, though I usually read novels from start to finish. Films have a stricter temporality, but at home a video can be fast forwarded and rewound, and watched again instantly. This user control has been programmed into the interface of standard streaming video players on computers, like QuickTime and RealPlayer. *Online Caroline's* temporality is closer to that which is common in computer games, where you can only back up if you've remembered to save the game earlier on. Except that in *Online Caroline* there's no way to save the game. You can only restart. And you can only do that if you're a sufficiently sophisticated user of the Internet that you can provide *Online Caroline* with a new, working email address.

An important part of *Online Caroline's* temporality lies in the emails. Printed epistolary novels like *Pamela* (Richardson 2001) or *Les Liasons Dangereuses* (Laclos 1965) and disc-based hypertexts that incorporate emails like *Forward Anywhere* (Malloy and Marshall 1995) present a finite collection of emails. Each email is locked into the text as a finite body of work. Even online email narratives like *Blue Company* (Wittig 2001), *Two Minutes* (1999) and *Love, Life & Email* (Interacta 2001) can now only be read as archived collections of messages and are no longer accessible in "real time", with emails arriving daily as they did when these works were first presented to readers. In a web archive, all the emails are accessible at any time and the effect is similar to a printed epistolary novel. *Online Caroline* doesn't stay put as these collections of emails do; it extends itself into the non-fictional world by sending emails to the real reader.

Although some epistolary novels were originally published in volumes released at intervals of months or years, this rhythm of publishing didn't correspond to the time of

the narrative as Caroline's letters do. Collections of letters, whether hypertextual like *Forward Anywhere* or printed like *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* are closed. This clear termination makes it clear that the story the letters relate happened in the past. On the level of each individual letter in an epistolary novel, narration is fixed in the present and looks into the future (Altman 1982). In Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (2001), for instance, Pamela's parents have to wait for letters from their daughter, and they cannot force the speed of the narration, that is, the frequency of the letters. When I read the novel *Pamela*, I have greater control over the temporality of the letters than the characters inside the fiction do: I can read it as fast as I like or skip sections entirely.

The emails in *Online Caroline*, on the other hand, are spread out in time. You receive one a day, and nothing in them or on the web site tells you whether there's a limited number of emails or whether they'll continue for ever. You don't know the size of the text, and the story appears to be happening in real time. Being part of the fiction in *Online Caroline*, I am a captive to the time of the fictional world.

Impotence and guilt

My relationship to Caroline is defined by its impotence. She can ask me for help but there's no way I can do anything that will really change her story. And yet I'm left feeling responsible for her fate.

Don't think I haven't noticed how oddly David is behaving, by the way. The question is: what can I do about it? I mean, what can WE do about it?

What I'm trying to say is - don't just sit there. HELP ME OUT HERE!! (Email no. 19)

I've distracted her by being her friend and reading her story. If I hadn't kept reading, she'd still be alive, arrested in limbo, perhaps sending me plaintive emails now and then telling me she missed me. If I hadn't read David's parts of the web page, perhaps I wouldn't have "encouraged him" in his experiments on Caroline. Reading, in *Online Caroline*, is being an accomplice to murder.

When the story is finally over, Caroline is unable to send more emails. Instead, I receive a thank you email from the president of XPT, the company David works for. The email seals my guilt, leaving me feeling that perhaps I could have saved Caroline from her fate had I made different choices in what sounds more and more like a game.

Thanks to you, our operatives were allowed to carry out their tasks without hindrance, and Caroline's life was irrevocably changed. We were particularly grateful to you for preventing Caroline from developing complicated and distracting relationships with Simon and Sophie. She did not want them. (Final email from Sir Gerald Inomynte, President and CEO, XPT)

Like the score card rating my cruelty and impatience in *Dream Kitchen, Online Caroline* reverses the relationship between me and the work. I'm not in charge at all. I'm a pawn in an elaborate game of chess or in a lab experiment, and I don't know the rules or the goal.

I'm not in charge of reading *Online Caroline*. I'm not a disinterested reader or viewer. I'm involved. My explorations through the text make me feel as though I have choices and as though I am in control. The narrative seems to adjust itself to *my* actions and responses. When I look more closely, I see that the choices I have are very limited, and I'm doing exactly what the system asks me rather than the other way round. Then I see that the system is paying as much attention to the details of the way I *read* as it is to my deliberate responses.

I'm told what happens in this story, I don't discover it. I'm not active. I'm not in control. The text I'm reading is the active party here. It reveals my secrets, and tells me so. It's made me a receiver. I don't play it. It plays me.

CHAPTER 4 ADDRESSING THE READER

“Look straight in my eyes. Talk to me.” These aren’t words between lovers, or from a parent to an errant child. They’re guidelines for good customer service, tacked up behind the counter in a Texan bakery. Americans know that you need to be seen, that you need to be acknowledged as an important person, as *you*. That need is institutionalised and commercially exploited. You see it in the service agendas on bakery walls. You feel it in the soft dollar bill you’re supposed to tip the bellboy, but that you keep tightly clenched in your palm, still sweating from the Texan heat, though the air-conditioning is cold, too cold for a Northern European like you, used to harsh climates but not to these contrasts. The dollar bill lies damp in your hand. You know you’re supposed to smile. You should say thank you and calmly give the dollar to the man standing smiling as he’s been taught, looking you straight in the eyes. You’ve been told the rules of this game. He looks you in the eye to make you feel important, an individual, and you’re supposed to pay him for it. You know what you’re supposed to do. But you don’t do it. You can’t play the part.

Maybe you’ve never really been in a Texan bakery and never stood tongue-tied, too caught in Northern European pseudo-egalitarianism to tip a bellboy. But you’ve met that “you” before, haven’t you? The “you” that writers use when they want to make the reader feel seen. The “you” you read at the end of *The Cat in a Hat*: “What would you do if your mother asked you?” (Seuss 1957: 61). You hear it when a character in a film turns to look straight into the camera, straight at *you*, speaking straight to you. You answer that “you” with a click of your mouse in *afternoon*: “Do you want to hear about it?” (Joyce 1990: ‘begin’); leap into it at the invitation of an adventure game: “You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door” (Blank and

Lebling 1981); pay for it in excitement after reading the ads for the newest game: “It’s up to you to stop the conspirators from achieving their goals.” (*Deus Ex Official Web Site*, 2000) Caroline, David Still and *Bino & Cool’s Masterclass* all address you in the second person: that same inclusive “you” that makes you instantly part of something that you cannot fully control.

All these “you”s are different. But they have a common ancestor. You, the reader or listener, have been addressed since ancient times. The ways you’ve been addressed have names: *apostrophes* (“breaking off the discourse to address some person or personified thing either present or absent” (Lanham 1991)) and *interrogatios* (popularly known as rhetorical questions: questions directed to the reader or the audience without any answer being expected). Both these figures are rhetorical in the sense that they are elements of style and don’t exceed the text or speech. You’re not expected to answer. I often apostrophise you, my reader, and ask you rhetorical questions. But when you read this thesis, you’re supposed to read and stay quiet. There’s no space within the text for you to respond. You can write me an email if you like (jill.walker@uib.no); stop me on the street to challenge me; ask me questions or raise objections at the defence. Perhaps your comments will change Jill Walker’s opinions about the topics discussed here. But your response will always be outside of the text: neither necessary to your reading, nor changing the text that you read. Even if you scribble in the margins, there’ll still be copies of this thesis in the library full of apostrophes to you but with none of your answers.

In hypertexts, computer games and certain other electronic texts, an apostrophe to the reader can and often does require a response. The reader’s answer is inscribed in the text, and enacted by the reader. These are simulations where you are part of that which is modelled. You are the point of ontological fusion between worlds.

This chapter is about the second person address and how it has been used through the ages. It's about how you seem to be part of the texts you read and the games you play, and how your scripted response can be necessary to the very act of reading or playing. And it's also about what being directly addressed as "you" can mean when you don't really have the opportunity to answer freely.

"Wonderfully stirring"

Directly addressing the reader (or, I think, the user or player) is an "irresistible invitation", writes Irene Kacandes (Kacandes 1993: 139). You're walking down the street, when someone calls out "Hey, you!" How can you help but turn? Of course you assume that you're the "you", for an instant at least. You turn because the word "you" is empty in itself. The vacuum inside it sucks you in, filling itself with you, and it will take a moment before you realise that you may not belong there (for a political discussion of this function, see Althusser 1971).

The word "you" is ready to be filled by anyone. It is empty: it doesn't refer outside of the situation in which it is uttered. There's a word for this emptiness: *deixis*. Deictic words like "you", "I", "she", "this", "that", "there" have no meaning except in relation to other words and within a context. Their power lies in this emptiness. Filling the empty space of a "you" can be "wonderfully stirring" for a reader, as writers and rhetoricians have known since ancient times (Quintilian 1953, 38-39; bk. 9, ch. 22).

In his treatise on the sublime, the Greek-Roman rhetorician Longinus both uses and recommends this kind of direct address to the reader. His treatise is styled as a letter to a friend who has asked him to write about the sublime:

You will remember, my dear Postimius Terentianus, that when we examined together the treatise of Caecilius on the Sublime, we found that it fell below the dignity of the whole subject, while it failed signally to grasp the essential points, and conveyed to its readers but little of that practical help which it should be a writer's principal aim to give. . . . Since you have urged me, in my turn, to write a brief essay on the sublime for your special gratification, let us consider whether the views I have formed contain anything which will be of use to public men. (Longinus 1935: 41)

Discussing how rhetorical figures can be used to transport the audience into the sublime, Longinus frequently returns to various forms of direct address:

All such cases of direct personal address place the hearer on the very scene of action. . . . You will make your hearer more excited and more attentive, and full of active participation, if you keep him on the alert by words addressed to himself. (111)

“Active participation”: that sounds familiar, don’t you think? The active participation – dare I say interaction - of the user is one of the highest goals of anyone claiming cyber-credibility these days. Go to an exhibition of electronic art and you’ll undoubtedly find the catalogue full of the curator’s enthusiastic writings about participation and interaction (see, for instance, Stenslie 2000: 17), though the artworks themselves probably don’t permit much more than the occasional click of a button. Web sites, entertainment, games, education: they all scream to proclaim their interactive content, usually meaning little more than a scattering of animations and sound effects. And quite often, all that user participation means is that they talk to “you”. “You” is used in excess in electronic texts. It’s present in films, advertising and journalism too. The rhetoric of participation and of inclusion is all around us.

But today’s electronic “you” is expected to answer, unlike its non-electronic counterparts. Longinus’s “active participation” has become more literal. The identification is external and physical, and not just emotional. So you answer. But what exactly is the nature of that answer? What are you expected to do? Building on Walton’s theory of fiction, I would say that you are expected to pretend. But there are other ways of understanding what happens between you and the text. A common model for understanding that relationship is the narrative communication model: a system that draws an absolute line between what is inside the text and what is outside the text. You are outside of it. The textual you is not you, the flesh and blood reader.

Narratees and readers

The narratologist Seymour Chatman maps the narrative communication situation as follows:

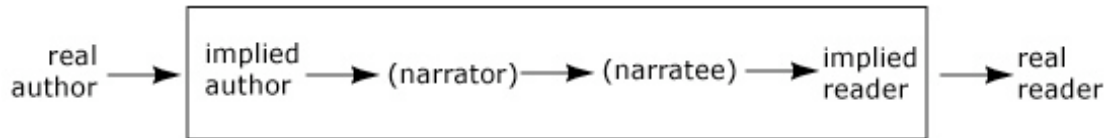


Figure 10: Chatman's model of the narrative communication situation (Chatman 1978: 151).

Outside the box are the elements that are outside of the text itself. On one side is the real author. The real author of *this* text is a woman notionally called Jill Walker, who doesn't necessarily always identify with the narrating "I" or "me" in the text – although the conventions of this genre probably lead you to expect a reasonable degree of identification between the real author and the narrating "I". On the receiving end of all those arrows is the real reader. That's you. Not the "you" that "I" think I'm writing to, but the actual living person reading these words. According to Chatman (and most other theorists around) it's extremely important that you remember that there's a difference between the "you" addressed by the text and the flesh and blood individual who's actually reading these words.

Moving in towards the centre of the diagram you'll notice the implied author, who is not a person or a character, but the implied set of principles organising the narrative. In other words, the implied author is the reader's reconstruction of the designer of the text, which need not correspond to the real author (Booth 1983: 71-76). The narrator is the text's "I", the voice speaking or writing, (that's me, not the flesh and blood Jill Walker) and the narratee is the character to whom the narrator is telling the story (you must be a character to me, because how could I possibly know who you really are?) Chatman doesn't think a narrator and narratee are necessary in narrative communication, that's why he's put brackets around them in the figure. Other theorists disagree with him, arguing that there is *always* a narrating voice, though it may not call

itself “I” as I do (Prince 1987: 65). The implied reader, the final element in the model, is the counterpart to the implied author; it is the reader presupposed by the entire text. This means that the implied reader is not explicitly inscribed in the text, so is not referred to as “you”. Likewise the implied author, being merely an idea rather than a person or character, has no textual voice and cannot narrate. Rather, these two textual functions are the “implicit image” of author and reader in the text (Prince 1987: 42).

By now you may be wondering what on earth I think I’m doing, saying that “I” am the narrator of this text. How can a PhD thesis have a narrator? A thesis isn’t a narrative, and probably most electronic texts aren’t either, so why bother with all this, you complain. No, this essay isn’t a narrative, not according to any narratological definition I’ve heard anyway. But there’s plenty of narrating in it. Lots of telling, some events of a kind, some description and at least two fairly clear characters: the narrator, which refers to itself as “I” and sometimes “me”, and the narratee, referred to as “you”. The same goes for electronic texts. Though computer games or hypertext fictions probably aren’t narratives as such, there is certainly narration in these texts (Aarseth 1997: 94-95). Chatman’s discussion of the positions of the narrator, narratee, real author and real reader are very relevant for any textual communication, whether fictional or non-fictional, narrative or merely containing traces of narration.

There are, of course, other ways of seeing your relationship with the text. In the first two chapters of this thesis I wrote about the user’s relationship with the fictional world. This chapter and the next stick to narratology and the text rather than the world it allows us to image.

Voyeurism or performance

When you read a representational work, you’re cast in one or several roles. One role is that which Chatman calls the implied reader; it’s the set of values the text assumes in

the reader. Chatman writes that you take this role as a second self when you enter the fictional contract (Chatman 1978: 150). There may also be a clear narratee in the text, as when the story is told to a “you”, but this narratee doesn’t have to coincide with the implied reader. In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, for instance, the narratees (and narrators) of most letters are much more cynical than the implied reader, who is expected to see through the narrators’ and narratees’ cruelty (Chatman 1978: 150). Similarly, in *Dream Kitchen* (Cmielewski and Starrs 2000), the user is forced to commit atrocities in order to access the work at all, but these acts are choreographed and presented so that the actual user not only rejects the actions she fictionally performs (playing a role equivalent to that of the narratee) but also understands that the implied author and reader of *Dream Kitchen* condemn the behaviour.

This all gets rather complicated when the “you” in the text, the narratee, seems to refer to the real reader. Often these seeming addresses to the reader are ironic reflections about the main story, from an extradiegetic narrator to an extradiegetic narratee³. Comments like these often highlight the act of narration or of reading. This can be seen in 19th century novels:

If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations, reduce them to a lowly standard. (Brontë 1902: 1)

You can find a similarly ironic voice in hypertext essays:

Nice story, you say? Here’s the point. (Kaplan 1995)

Reading passages like these, you share in an ironic detachment from the act of narration or argument itself. This sharing can make you feel included: you feel *seen* by the text.

It’s pleasurable to feel that acknowledgment, in the same way as it feels good when your

³ But theoretically never from the implied author to the implied reader, and certainly not from the real author to the real reader. None of these positions can be inscribed in the text; they can only be inferred from it.

waiter looks you in the eyes and seems to really see you. Just so long as he doesn't look too long or too hard, or demand too much in return.

You've read stories you've not been able to stop reading, where you've hungrily devoured page after page, needing to know what happens next. That's a different pleasure from the enjoyment of being "seen" by the text, of sharing inside jokes with the narrator. It's known as narrative desire or narrative pleasure, and is an easy pleasure that is often found in non-reflexive texts that don't problematise things like the relationship between the reader, the implied reader and the narratee. You happily allow yourself a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge 1973: 2:6)⁴ and see what the text wants to do with you, letting yourself slip into the shell of the "you" in the text you're reading and enjoying the way you're sucked into the story. You love being seduced by the narrative.

Texts that have an explicit "you" can often make this seduction more visible and more self-reflexive. The tension between the safely voyeuristic pleasures of narrative desire and the presence of a "you" that draws (or forces) you into the story can be an extra source of pleasure. See how you like reading John Barth's apostrophe to a reader: "The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction." (Barth 1988: 127)

There are some narratives, though, that blur the line between voyeuristic reader and protagonist in a different way, by making the textual "you" the protagonist of the story, similarly to role-playing games, but without the conversational turn-taking of narrator and narratee. This kind of "you" has been termed *narrative "you"* by Bruce

⁴ It's worth reminding you that this isn't quite what Coleridge meant when he wrote about a "willing suspension of disbelief". He was talking about why we can read and enjoy romantic or supernatural stories them despite their lack of realism. As you'll see later, the phrase has taken on different meanings since Coleridge first used it, and the

Morrissette (1965). According to Morrissette, the true narrative “you” requires a singular past or present action to be ascribed to the “you”, because narratives deal with events rather than with generalised observations. If the use of “you” is truly narrative in this sense, it often seems a disguised ‘I’, “a ‘first person’ narrator talking to himself” (Bal 1997: 37). A “you” that is tied to specific, singular events usually accumulates so many clear characteristics that *you* the real reader can’t fit into this very tightly defined subject position. Italo Calvino’s novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* uses such a narrative “you”. Here the “you” position remains open for the first pages, allowing room for most readers:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, “No, I don’t want to watch TV!” Raise your voice--they won’t hear you otherwise--”I’m reading! I don’t want to be disturbed!” (Calvino 1998: 5)

This “you” doesn’t remain empty for long though, it becomes more and more limited. As a real reader, you may well feel excluded from the offered position. Being told to “tell the others” is already exclusive; what if you live alone and have no others to tell? Yes, the “you” in the text is like you the real reader in that he is a reader and seemingly reading the very same book as you are. But he is male, he has personality traits you may not have, he falls in love with a female reader – these things may not fit you, the real reader. As you read, you find more and more that the “you” addressed in the text is *not* you, the real reader. Your identification with the textual you becomes more and more uneasy, and you become more aware of the impossibility of really participating in the text. Or perhaps it merely adds some spice to your voyeuristic narrative desire, some of that excitement you feel when you read a letter meant for somebody else?

way we identify with textual positions is one of these meanings. Walton suggests, too, that rather than suspending disbelief, when reading fictional works we *invent*.

There's another kind of "you" in printed texts, as well, an address that you enact simply by reading it. Irene Kacandes calls this use of "you" the *literary performative*. Literary performatives are fairly rare, and seem to limit themselves to statements of the reader's activity in reading, as in Barth's "You've read me this far then? Even this far?" The act of reading these words is an involuntary performative, Kacandes argues, because "one can't help doing what one is told, as long as one keeps reading. . . [A]ffirmative 'answers' are generated . . . as soon as the questions are read by someone – by anyone!" (Kacandes 1993: 142) Such involuntary performatives are not limited to literature: Kacandes describes the very mechanism we find in *Dream Kitchen*.

Identification: the willing suspension of disbelief

In many digital texts, identification is pushed as far as possible. This is most explicit in computer games, where you will usually have some control over the protagonist of the game. In the rhetoric surrounding computer games, both from game developers and players, the difference between *playing* and *being* the protagonist is blurred. There is a brand of total identification that appears to be a mark of excellence, an essential criterion of quality among gamers, as you can see in this argumentation for *Doom*'s inclusion among the "top 50 games of all time":

Unquestionably, the most appealing aspect of Doom was its sheer fun factor; each of the editors had to admit to spending countless hours roaming about its virtual halls. But what was so fun about it? What made this so much more fun than anything else? (. . .) [I]t's because these graphics did more to suspend disbelief – crucial to a compelling gameplay experience – than any game to come before it (and some would say, than any game to come after it). Before you were even out of the first level, you felt as if you WERE in those halls, battling those demons. (qtd by Juul 1999: 77)

Notice how this game reviewer uses Coleridge's phrase, emphasising that the reason the game was so good was that it "did more to suspend disbelief". Here the suspension of disbelief is not about Coleridge's "poetic faith" but about allowing yourself to be someone else for a time. It's about letting yourself believe that you're really in the halls you see displayed on your screen. You can see the same mode of identification in the

marketing announcements for *Deus Ex*, a more recent game that combines *Doom*'s 3d interface of guns and monsters with elements of role-playing:

To succeed, you must travel the globe in a quest for knowledge, develop your character's strengths as you see fit, build a network of allies to assist you, determine when stealth and strategy are more important than action. And each time you think you've got the mystery solved, the game figured out, there's another, deeper mystery to be unraveled. You will never know who to trust, who your friends are, who's in on the conspiracy and who's innocent. Maybe no one is. (*Deus Ex Official Web Site*)

You'll have noticed how frequently "you" is used in this excerpt. Now look at how the meaning of this "you" slips backwards and forwards, rhythmically, between *you* the real reader (or player) and "you", the protagonist of the game. "You", the fictional character travels the globe while *you* the real player plan which of *your* character's strengths to develop. By the last two sentences of the excerpt, these two different "you"s have merged. You (and now I mean you, the reader of this essay and the potential player of *Deus Ex*), are supposed to suspend your belief in yourself, rather than in the unrealism of the game-world, so you can *be* the character you're playing. You're supposed to forget all about Chatman's careful separation of real reader, implied reader and narratee. This extreme identification is different from the voyeuristic, bleak identification we know from reading novels or watching films. It's Kacandes' narrative performative, but swollen almost past recognition. You have to enact the text's performative in order to play.

Forced participation

Michel Butor has described second person narration as a didactic or interrogatory situation in which a character is told her *own* story by someone else, because she is either unable or unwilling to tell it herself. She may lack the language, the self-awareness or the memories; or she may refuse to tell, perhaps because her story would incriminate her or because she doesn't trust the person who wants to hear it. Butor uses the example of a detective interrogating a suspect to illustrate a case where the

protagonist “you” refuses to speak herself, and he connects this to force. This narrative is *forced* upon the “you” (Butor 1972: 80-81).

Do you feel forced by the way I talk to you in this essay? As you read, how do you feel about the way I use “you”? Are you offended, confused, flattered, seduced, violated? Maybe the “you” position offered to you is open enough that you slip into it hardly noticing that it’s forced upon you? If using the word “you” is an “irresistible invitation” (Kacandes 1993: 139) then it can also be felt as a forced invitation, close to an act of violence. It is an involuntary performative.

Often when you come across “you” in texts, you’ll suspect that the “you” is a hidden “I” in a concealed autobiographical story – as with the story of the Texan bellboy and the tipper. The “you” there was actually me, it was I who felt my nervous fingers wrinkling the dollar bill, unable to follow the script I knew was intended for me. To give the bellboy – a grown man, my father’s age – a dollar bill or even two or three felt impossible. I felt I would humiliate him, bruise his self-esteem and make a fool out of myself. Yet I knew it was expected of me. I felt forced into a situation I wasn’t truly a part of. I was forced into a role that wasn’t mine and that I didn’t want.

I often feel the same way when I’m confronted with a “you” in a text I’m reading. I know I’m supposed to feel an “irresistible invitation” at this direct address, and sometimes I do delight in it, seeing the role the text invites me to enter and enjoying the thrill of an identification that is grammatical and physical as well as emotional. I return the waiter’s open smile, listen to his recommendations with interest and leave him a tip, enjoying playing my part in this scripted ritual. Other times I resist the irresistible. In Calvino’s novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* I can see that I’m supposed to be the male “you”, the male reader who falls in love with a female reader, but I refuse to play along. In Mechner’s graphical adventure game *The Last Express* (1997) I’m supposed to play the young American man who’s expected to figure out why his friend has been

murdered and why that friend asked him to be on this train – but I’d rather play the mysterious woman that “I” (well, the young American man) is obviously supposed to be attracted to, or I’d like to jump off the train, maybe rifle through “my” own pockets to see who this creature I’m supposed to be is. When I’m the young American, every other character in the game calls me “you”, and the help files, where they exist, always tell me “You are...” But I don’t like playing the role of that “you”. I quit the game. I didn’t give the bellboy in Texas the dollar bill I should have tipped him either. Direct address in these cases attempts to forcibly break down the differences between the real reader, the implied reader and the narratee. I am forced into a script, forced into participation. Sometimes that feels good. Sometimes I run away.

There is a qualitative difference between the identification you may feel with the “you” in this essay or Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night* and the identification you are forced to enact with a “you” in an electronic text. You are free to resist my addresses to you in this essay. But in many electronic texts, this freedom is gone. When you are asked, “Do you want to hear about it?” in *afternoon*, it’s almost impossible to keep your distance to that address. If you click your mouse in answer to the question posed to you, you accept your role; you become “you”. You perform an involuntary performative. *afternoon* still allows you to stop reading, or to follow another path and ignore the address. But if you answer the question posed to “you”, you let the text force you into a role.

A game like *The Last Express* doesn’t allow you any freedom to choose another path. If you don’t accept that you are the very specific “you” offered, the game will not move on and there will be no story. By continuing to play you “execute an involuntary performative.” (Kacandes 1993: 142)

The ritual of submission

When you perform your part in this gaming performative you take part in a ritual, much as you do when you complete a complicated task in your word processor by following steps explained in the manual: “we are like participants in a square dance, repeating formulaic sequences, with the relevant manual page [for the word processor] acting as the caller of the dance” (Murray 1997: 128). Janet Murray calls this formulaic performance of a fixed repertoire *participatory*, but stresses that the human participant (yes, that’s you) has no agency:

Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices (..) But activity alone is not agency. For instance, in a tabletop game of chance, players may be kept very busy spinning dials, moving game pieces, and exchanging money, but they may not have any real agency. The players’ actions have effect, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are not related to the players’ intentions. (126-8)

These are rituals of seduction or of force, where every citizen, every customer, every reader, even you, must be individually seen and acknowledged, seduced. We live in a world where every voter must be made to think she is important. Where looking into your eyes, pretending to see *you* rather than yet another customer is the way to ensure a shop’s (or a book’s or a game’s) survival. Where stories, whether in tabloids, hypertext fictions or games, must seem to be about **you**.

You feel pleasure in playing a role. It’s a pleasure that is related but not identical to narrative pleasure. When you read a narrative you enjoy being a voyeur. You are driven by a desire to read it all, and reading all, the story ends: your desire is dead (Brooks 1984). When you play a game, or enact the involuntary performatives of responding to a link in a hypertext, you are more than a voyeur. You enjoy that feeling of being part of the text, part of the machine. Do you enjoy the limitations of your participation: the feeling of being forced, of submitting? Is this the pleasure of ritual? In games, and even in some hypertext fiction, death (of your character or your reading) is your punishment when you stray from the path.

Working with a machine the operator becomes most efficient when she stops thinking about what she's doing, and begins to operate in a semi-automatic mode.

This feels good. (Thomas 1993: 20)

Do you think that is why we play games? Do you enjoy submitting to the code?

CHAPTER 5 **A NARRATOLOGICAL APPROACH**

In the discussion of *Online Caroline* in chapter 3, I found that there is an important difference between feeling as though one is participating in the action of the story and feeling that one has influence on the way in which the story is presented. In this chapter I propose a descriptive model that distinguishes between these two kinds of user involvement.

Several models and taxonomies have been suggested for describing electronic texts. Aarseth's theory of cybertext proposes what is probably the most detailed model, defining many different variables which in their various combinations can describe a very large number of distinct genres (Aarseth 1997). Others choose to focus on just a couple of characteristics, such as interactivity and immersion (Ryan 2001a; Ryan 2001b), different kinds of interactivity (Murray 1997; Jensen 1999) or the pair of hypermediacy and transparency (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Some models emphasise a conceptual understanding of what digital textuality is (Manovich 2001), the ways in which games may be narrative (Jenkins 2003) or list layers or aspects of a digital work that should be examined in an analysis (Konzack 2002).

My model combines aspects of Marie-Laure Ryan's work and of Espen Aarseth's taxonomy, but views these through the lens of the narratological distinction between story (the events described) and discourse (the way in which they are described). I propose that users can be positioned as internal or external to each of these levels. The works I discuss in this thesis all position the user as internal to both story and discourse. This allows me to describe the works formally and to see more clearly what distinguishes them from other interactive and non-interactive works.

This chapter uses the narrotological framework for describing narrators' position in relation to the story and the discourse, but transfers this to the reader, or rather, the user. Narratology accurately describes the narrator's position in relation to the story, however it has generally seen both the narrator and the narratee as part of the text rather than positions that can have their own agency. This careful separation of text from world is made problematic by interactive works, as Ruth Nestvold points out:

[E]lectronic fiction makes it more difficult to speak of the addressee or reader in the text as a fictional construct, "something whose existence is strictly circumscribed within art,"⁵ as critics have been wont to do since Booth defined the implied author and the implied reader. (Nestvold 1997)

Theories of fictionality and reader response criticism are two approaches that refuse to box the text in, ignoring the reader. This chapter presents a different approach to understanding interactive works than that laid out in chapters one and two, and it is not dependent on or necessary to them. This is an attempt to extend narratology to describe interactive works formally. I have included it here because I think there is value in considering several ways of approaching these works.

User and story

I will use "story" fairly broadly, to refer to not only the events narrated but also the fictional world the events are set in, or, in non-fictional or non-narrative texts, the ideas or world that is represented by the text.

A narrator is either internal or external to the story; that is, the narrator can be a character in the story he tells or not. I am using the terms internal and external for simplicity's sake to refer to Genette's homodiegetic and heterodiegetic (Genette 1980: 245). A homodiegetic narrator is what I am calling an internal narrator and a heterodiegetic narrator is what I am calling an external heterodiegetic. The *diegesis* is

equivalent to the story level or the fictional world. Extradiegetic levels are frame narratives. For instance, in *Arabian Nights*, there is an extradiegetic level in which Scheherazade tells nightly stories to avoid execution, and there is the diegetic or intradiegetic level of the events in each of the stories she tells. Following this, a narrator can be described as intradiegetic or extradiegetic. If a narrator A narrates the story of B, but A herself is a character in a framing narrative that is narrated by C, then A is an intradiegetic narrator in relation to C's extradiegetic level.

Thus, in *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade functions as a heterodiegetic narrator (since she does not tell her own story) and as an intradiegetic rather than extradiegetic one (since she is a character in a framing narrative that she does not tell). Conversely, in *Gil Blas*, the narrator is a homodiegetic and extradiegetic one (he tells his own story, but as narrator, he is not part of any diegesis). (Prince 1987)

In the following I will use internal and external most frequently, but when dealing with frame narratives that include the user as a character I will use extradiegetic and intradiegetic.

My goal in this chapter is to use these descriptions of the narrator's position to construct a mirror image that describes the user (reader). Let me start by giving an example of a narrator who is internal to the story, before moving on to describe a user who is internal to the story.

A classic first person narrator telling his or her own story is usually internal, as in Megan Heyward's interactive narrative *I am a Singer* (1997). In the first screens we see phrases and sentences that clearly situate the narrator as the main character of the story:

I know everything about myself.
I remember nothing.
(..)
There was this accident, you see. That's how it happened, they say.
(..)

⁵ Here Nestvold quotes Robyn R. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers U. P., 1989): 197.

My doctor, my manager, my therapist. Hours are spent each day trying to help me to remember. (Heyward 1997)

Unlike this internal narrator, an external narrator is not a participant in the story, and is sometimes nearly invisible. Most nodes in Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* have an external narrator:

It was early October, a week or so after Urquhart watched her get on that bus to Fort Benning, a few days into his life of unforeseen solitude. {Moulthrop, 1991 #41@'See No Evil'}

This is sometimes known as third person narration, since the characters in the story are all referred to in the third person, as "him" or "her". "By definition," Genette writes, "every narrating that is not (that does not have – or pretends not to have – any occasion to be) in the first person is heterodiegetic" (Genette 1988: 133). A text where the protagonist is referred to in the third or second person, rather than in the first person, thus situates the narrator as external.

A first person narrator will refer to the narratee using the second person pronoun "you". If Genette's classification transfers to the narratee, a narratee referred to in the second person must then be internal. If the user can be identified with this narratee, the user is also internal to the story. For this to occur, there must be a clear position in the story that is reserved for the user: a role into which the user can step.

It is controversial to talk of such an identification between narratee and user, because a basic tenet of narratology is that the boundaries around the text are watertight. Chatman's narrative communication model (Figure 10) illustrates this clearly with the box separating the narratee and the implied reader from the actual reader. This makes it very hard to analyse the relationship between user and work from a narratological perspective. As I mentioned above, theories of fictionality and make-believe are one alternative approach that does allow us to think about this relationship; reader response theory is another. I have chosen fictional theories as my main method

of understanding users and their relationship to interactive works, though this chapter is an attempt at a more structural model.

To summarise: for my purposes, a user is internal to the story when the narratee is internal to the story and the user is readily identified with the narratee.

If the user is internal to the story, that is, if the user is positioned as a character in the story he or she reads or experiences, the user position can be called homodiegetic. The user position is heterodiegetic if the reader is external to the story, or absent from the story he or she reads, to rephrase Genette (Genette 1988: 244).

The user of *Online Caroline* (Bevan and Wright 2000) thus becomes firmly positioned as internal to the story. Caroline wants an online friend, and the user is that friend. The program uses the data you give it about yourself (your name, age, likes and dislikes) to write you into the story, and even sends emails to your actual email address. It is possible to play a role, and invent a character, not yourself, to be Caroline's friend. You can invent a name and personality not your own, create an email account in your fictional character's name and consciously choose to play that role in every interaction with Caroline. Arguably, the user and the narratee are then not presented as interchangeable. Instead of imagining "I am Caroline's friend", the user might think "I am controlling an imagined entity that is, fictionally, Caroline's friend". If so, the user will not experience herself as being internal to the story. But although this user positioning is possible, it is not the dominant position offered to the user by the text. Unlike online role-playing games, *Online Caroline* does not ask the user to create a character. It simply asks for the user's name and email address.

There are a lot of digital narratives that position the reader as barely internal to the story, or as partially internal. *Uncle Buddy* includes the user as a character in the frame narrative, or the extradiegetic level, but the user is external to the stories told by Uncle Buddy (McDaid 1992). The user's position is similar to that of Scherazade, who

tells stories that are not her own. *I am a Singer* similarly gives the user a job or a function in the story: to help the narrator regain her memory. This is made explicit on the CD cover:

“I am a Singer” is a CD-ROM narrative which tells the fictional story of Isabelle Jones, rising Australian pop star, who is involved in an accident on the eve of a major tour and suffers amnesia. Although Jones knows her identity, she can’t make a meaningful connection with who she is.

In “I Am A Singer” the user assists Jones as she attempts to reconstruct her identity through various sources – media reports, diaries, anecdote, analysis and dream. (Heyward 1997)

“The user assists Jones”, the cover text reads. There isn’t even an invitation here, merely a statement of fact. This is the user’s function. This function is less clear in the work itself. A voice whispers: “I remember (help me) nothing (help me)”. The help me’s are whispered as soft asides, beneath the narrator’s breath, yet they have no other possible addressee than the user. After exploring the singer’s diaries, stories and fragmented memories for half an hour or an hour, *I am a Singer* reaches a point of closure as Isabelle Jones does regain her memories.

Without the description on the CD cover I would not necessarily have thought of myself as being a part of the story as an active helper. I might not have paid much attention to the whispered pleas for help. Following the story I had a stronger feeling of shadowing the protagonist, much as I identify with a character in a film or novel without feeling like a character of my own in the fictional world.

This is similar to the “Dear reader” of 19th century novels, where the narrator occasionally speaks directly to the reader, but both remain safely outside of the primary diegetic level of the story. Both in *I am a Singer* and in many such 19th century novels, the user remains external to the main story, or to the first diegetic level, but is fully or partially internal to an extradiegetic level: a framing narrative which explains how the reader is given access to the main narrative.

Other descriptions of user and story

Espen Aarseth and Marie-Laure Ryan have made similar distinctions between between a reader who is internal to the work and a reader who is external to the work, though without the clear connection with the story/discourse division that I wish to emphasise. Aarseth describes something similar using the terms personal and impersonal perspective:

If the text requires the user to play a strategic role as a character in the world described by the text, then the text's perspective is **personal**; if not, then it is **impersonal**. A text such as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* pretends to involve the reader as a participant, but there is nothing for the real reader to do but read. In a MUD, on the other hand, the reader is (in part) personally responsible for what happens to his or her character. (63)

Impersonal and personal perspective in Aarseth's sense crosses the boundaries of story and discourse. However, the reader need not be required "to play a strategic role as a character" to be internal to the story. It is enough that the reader be referred to as if he or she is a character in the story, as in *Online Caroline*.

Marie-Laure Ryan has proposed a similar distinction between internal and external interactivity.

In the internal mode, the user projects himself as a member of the fictional world, either by identifying with an avatar, or by apprehending the virtual world from a first person perspective. In the external mode, the reader situates himself outside the virtual world. He either plays the role of a god who controls the fictional world from above, or he conceptualizes his activity as navigating a database. This dichotomy corresponds roughly to Aarseth's distinction between personal and impersonal perspective (63): a world-internal participation will logically result in the user's personification, since worlds are spaces populated by individuated existents, while world-external involvement does not require a concrete persona. The only potential difference between Aarseth's labels and mine is the case of a user who makes strategic decisions for the participants, such as the commander in chief of an army, a sports coach, an author writing a novel, or a specific god. (Ryan 2001a)

Ryan completes her model with a second distinction: exploratory versus ontological interactivity. If a reader can explore a work, but cannot alter the events that occur in the world, or otherwise affect the fictional world that is represented by the work, the interactivity is exploratory. If reader actions can change the plot or the fictional world, it is ontological.

Ryan's internal/external couplet is basically the same as my use of internal/external, and it is close to Aarseth's personal/impersonal category, except that Ryan ties her division to the fictional world rather than to the story. There is little practical difference in that, however, there is a clear difference between her next set of terms, exploratory versus ontological interactivity and my second set of terms, where I relate the user to the discourse. I propose that just as the user can be internal or external to the story, she or he can also be internal or external to the discourse.

User and discourse

The reader's activity on a discourse level is described by Espen Aarseth's theory of cybertext, which is an approach to texts that analyses them based on how the reader traverses them rather than according to conventional genres. Without claiming to exhaustively describe every aspect of a text through this model, Aarseth presents seven variables that can describe any kind of text according to their mode of traversal. The reader or user functions in the taxonomy allow for four different kinds of action from the reader. Of course, readers are never passive recipients of texts: readers will always interpret a text, adjusting it to their own view of the world. However texts that offer the reader an interpretative function alone are non-ergodic, while texts that require non-trivial reader action are ergodic.

Besides the **interpretative** function of the user, which is present in all texts, the use of some texts may be described in terms of additional functions: the **explorative** function, in which the user must decide which path to take, and the **configurative** function, in which scriptons are in part chosen or created by the user. If textons or traversal function can be (permanently) added to the text, the user function is **textonic**. If all the decisions a reader makes about a text concern its meaning, then there is only one user function involved, here called interpretation. In a forking text, such as Cortázar's *Rayuela*, the reader must also explore, by making strategic choices about alternative paths, and in the case of adventure games, alternative actions. Some texts allow the user to configure their scriptons by rearranging textons or changing variables. And finally, in some cases the users can extend or change the text by adding their own writing or programming. (64)

Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (Calvino 1998), like most novels, films and images, expects the reader to interpret the text, but not to explore it spatially,

configure it or add parts to it. A print dictionary or encyclopaedia expects the reader to interpret and explore, but usually not to configure or add content. Of course readers and viewers may use the text in different ways. For instance, many fans of popular films, television series and novels are unsatisfied with just interpreting the series, as they are expected to, and they write their own versions of the stories in extensive individual and collaborative fan fiction. Readers of Tolkien and other fantasy literature devise their own fictional universes based on the texts they've read and they play role-playing games or make computer games or perform live re-enactments. Readers may configure texts by sampling them and picking certain sequences and images to rearrange in new orders, by quoting and making adaptations, hommages or parodies. They extend the text by writing their own additions, but these are separate to the first text. Both the configuring and textonic activities are outside of the text. They may create new texts but they do not change or affect the first text. I will not be discussing this kind of appropriation and manipulation of non-ergodic texts here. Rather than being interactivity, this is intertextuality, a well theorised phenomenon.

A user who is internal to the discourse can explore, configure or add to the work he or she is engaging with. The discourse adapts according to the user's actions, just for that performance, or for future users as well. It is quite possible for this to occur without the user's being internal to the story.

In Stuart Moulthrop's *Reagan Library* (1999), for instance, the user is internal to the discourse but not to the story. In *Reagan Library* the user is presented with a collection of web pages consisting of text and images. The top portion of the page is filled with a QuickTime VR image, a panoramic rendition of a smooth vector-generated landscape where the user can move the mouse to see the full 360° panorama. There are hot spots on certain objects and landmarks in the image, and clicking on any of these causes a new page to be shown. Each page shows the same landscape in the same

panoramic style, but from different places. If I click on the lighthouse in one panorama, the next panorama I see will show me the view *from* the lighthouse.

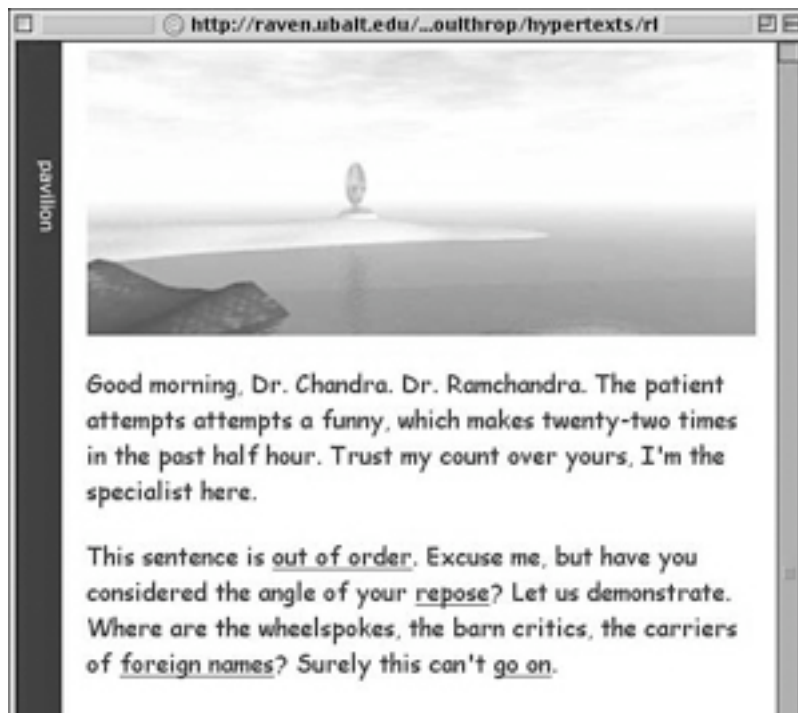


Figure 11 A screenshot of a page from Stuart Moulthrop's Reagan Library (1999).

The text beneath the images is hard to understand at first, because parts of it are randomly generated from a database of phrases. *Reagan Library* changes as it is read, and each time you return to a page, the text will contain fewer random phrases and become more and more cohesive. It takes about an hour, maybe two, to read and reread the whole work until it stabilises.

Reagan Library both tells a story and simulates forgetfulness or Alzheimer's. As you read the work you realise that it is in a sense a memory palace, a collection of a person's memories – but this person cannot remember easily. The memories stabilise as they are reread. The way in which this work must be read actualises the condition it describes. In this way, it resembles Michael Joyce's *afternoon*, where the digressive linking of nodes and sometimes apparently self-contradictory events described in each node lets the reader mirror the protagonist's attempts to avoid the issue he must

confront: that he may have killed – or perhaps only witnessed the death of – his son and ex-wife. (see also Douglas 1994; Walker 1999; Douglas 2000)

I gave examples of works in which the user is partially internal to the story. The same is possible in relation to the discourse. In *The Impermanence Agent* (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2000), the user surfs the web through a proxy server which picks up keywords in sites she or he visits. During the course of a week's surfing, the story tells itself as the user surfs through other content, and the order and content of the story depends partially on keywords in sites the user has visited. The user does affect the discourse in *The Impermanence Agent*, but only indirectly, and not through deliberate actions. So in this work the user may experience herself as external to the discourse, but does influence it, and so in practice is internal to it.

Online Caroline has almost the opposite strategy. While the user appears to be internal to the discourse and to have a great deal of influence on what is shown, her real influence on the discourse is limited to the exchanging of one phrase in an email for another. Though the user is internal to the discourse, exploring each day's website as she wants, for instance, she may feel as though she has a greater influence on the discourse than is objectively the case.

The user is external to the discourse in standard linear texts: print novels with no reader choices, e-book texts where the text is static and linear, and standard web journals and magazines with linear articles. A user surfing between and among linear web sites is, however, internal to the larger discourse of the web. Just as a story can be embedded within a frame narrative, the discourse of one text (an article in *Wired*, for instance) can be embedded in a larger discourse (the Web).

Putting it together

Having defined these different aspects of the reader’s relationship with the text, we can now look at how they work together, and how various kinds of texts might be described using these concepts.

user is:	external to discourse	internal to discourse
external to story	Classical novels and plays: Shakespeare, Ibsen, Austen, Dickens, Zola, etc. Mainstream cinema.	<p><i>Afternoon, Reagan Library, Uncle Buddy’s Funhouse.</i></p> <p>TV shows where home audiences can vote over alternate plots.</p> <p>Tree narratives or branching narratives like <i>Same Day Test</i>.</p> <p>The casino ad discussed in chapter 6.</p> <p><i>Kabul Kaboom.</i></p> <p><i>Impermanence Agent.</i></p>
internal to story	Parts of <i>If on a Winter’s Night</i> , the end of <i>Cat in a Hat</i> , involuntary performatives. Nigerian spam (chapter 6) if user does not respond.	<p><i>Online Caroline.</i></p> <p><i>Citadel of Chaos.</i></p> <p><i>Bino & Cool’s Masterclass, Dream Kitchen, Mission 01: Kill Bin Laden, Ashcroft Online, New York Defender.</i></p> <p>Nigerian spam if user responds.</p>

Table 1: Works analysed in this thesis ordered according to the user’s position as internal or external to the story and the discourse.

Some works are hard to place. *Gulf War 2*, for instance (discussed in chapter 7), is a simulation of events that may be triggered by the war on Iraq in early 2003. The game is relentlessly linear, and nothing the user does has any influence on the events portrayed or the way in which they are portrayed. The user is positioned as a god-like creature who supposedly controls the simulation, and so the user is internal to a frame narrative

of politicians giving advice though not to the blood and bombs of the war. Yet though the politicians and generals constantly ask the user to OK their suggestions, thus keeping the user very busy clicking the mouse, the user's frantic clicking makes absolutely no difference one way or another. The user's only power is to stop the action by refusing to click. While *Online Caroline* hides the user's lack of influence, *Gulf War 2* is quite open about it, parodying most strategy games' several-optioned pop up question boxes with outrageous remarks to which the user can only say "OK" or "continue". The user is only marginally internal to this discourse, despite the incessant clicking.

Most works where the user is internal to the story also position the user as internal to the discourse, though the opposite is not necessarily true. There are a few examples of works where the user is internal to the story but not to the discourse, but this user position appear to be difficult to sustain throughout a narrative. The first lines of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* are an example of this:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice--they won't hear you otherwise--"I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!" (Calvino 1998: 3)

In these lines, or at least in the first sentence, the *you* in the text describes the real reader of the book exactly. It probably doesn't describe you, the real reader of this thesis, because you are not about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, you are reading a thesis which includes a citation from Calvino's novel. Actually, even if you were reading Calvino's novel today, it would no longer be his *new* novel, since it was first published over twenty years ago, in 1980. And do you really always have the TV on in the next room? It is extremely hard to sustain this kind of direct identification between real reader and the story. Yet let us agree that a reader picking up a copy of this novel in the early eighties, seeing these first lines printed on the front cover of the book (as they are in some editions), would indeed feel internal to this story. The real, flesh

and blood reader fuses with the protagonist of the story. For a few lines, the reader is internal to the story. In Kacandes' terminology, the reader performs an involuntary performative.

As the novel continues, this fictional homodiegetic reader becomes more and more part of the story, and is increasingly clearly drawn, though the narrator repeatedly draws attention to his incomplete knowledge of personality of this reader-character (whom Calvino refers to as the Reader with a capital R). As I read at times I feel as though this Reader is me, and that the narrator's address to a "you" is an address to me. Of course, I am not a man, and I realise while reading that I am not actually meeting Ludmilla and her sister and so on. But I imagine the role of the Reader as mine in an imagined performance. At other times, it seems to me that I am standing with the narrator, and we are both addressing this Reader, this protagonist whom we wish to control.

At other times, the narrator addresses the Reader in almost exactly the same way as the player of an adventure game like *Zork* (Blank and Lebling 1981), or a gamebook like *Citadel of Chaos* (Steve Jackson 1983). After having discovered that the book he has purchased is misprinted, the Reader takes the book back to the shop and asks for a replacement. While there, he meets the Other Reader, beautiful Ludmilla, who has the same predicament and whom the Reader instantly desires. The narrator talks the Reader through his conversation with Ludmilla step by step:

Do you agree? Then say so. "Ah, yes, that sort of book is really worthwhile."

And she continues: "Anyway, this is also an interesting book, I can't deny that."

Go on, don't let the conversation die. Say something; just keep on talking "Do you read many novels? You do? So do I, or some at least, though nonfiction is more in my line..." Is that all you can think of? Are you stopping? Good night! Aren't you capable of asking her: Have you read this one? And this? Which of the two do you like better? There, now you have something to talk about for about half an hour. (30)

At moments like these, the narrator professes complete innocence of the details of the Reader's personality:

Who you are, Reader, your age, your status, profession, income: that would be indiscreet to ask. It's your business, your on your own. (32)

Reader, we are not sufficiently acquainted for me to know whether you move with indifferent assurance in a university or whether old traumas or pondered choices make a universe of pupils and teachers seem a nightmare to your sensitive and sensible soul. (47)

The narrator only ever describes the Reader's *actions* and *emotions*. No other qualities are defined, except for his sex: he is undoubtedly male. Surroundings are also described, but sparingly. For instance, in the first paragraph of the book we are told that "the TV is always on in the next room", and the suggestion that the Reader might want to raise his voice indicates that he lives with other people. Sometimes, the Reader is given a choice. In the first paragraph for instance: "Raise your voice (..) Or if you prefer, don't say anything." (3)

Though the Reader is referred to as "you" rather than by name, and though the designation of "Reader" is usually reserved for the actual reader, this diegetic Reader no longer matches the actual reader and so the actual reader moves into the familiar heterodiegetic relation to the story.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveller is a reference point in discussions of the second person address, because of its extended use of the second person, but also because of the ambiguity – does the "you" refer to the reader or not? Irene Kacandes argues that the "you" never completely fits the actual reader. Even the first line "You are about to begin reading..." is already false, for as a reader reads it, she is no longer about to begin but has *already begun* to read. "For the attentive reader, then, what this opening line accomplishes is both a seduction to feel addressed and a realisation that the call is not quite accurate" (Kacandes 1993: 170). While this may be strictly true, there is some leeway here. Dennis Schofield transfers Kaja Silverman's analysis of the hailing of the viewer at the beginning of Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* to the address to the "you" at the start of *If on a Winter's Night*. He argues that the lack of a clear

reference for the pronoun “you” allows the pronoun to be easily (though perhaps not necessarily) taken up by the reader or viewer. Schofield writes:

[B]efore the fictional character arrives on the scene, the only way for the viewer/reader to make sense of the statement is to situate him or herself as the subject of speech, the “you” of the utterance, as the only subject available to fill it, so that “the rest of the sentence . . . organises itself around the viewer [or reader], locating him or her in the narrative space” in the moments before the protagonist has come to claim it (Silverman, 1983: 49). And having been called into that space, having been interpellated as that subject, Silverman argues, the reader/viewer permits his or her subjectivity to be carried forward by the figure of the protagonist (Silverman, 1983: 49-50) albeit that in the Calvino there will be more subsequent resistance to being carried in such a way than there will be in a work of classical Hollywood cinema. (Schofield 1998: chapter 1)

This can be seen as a linguistic explanation of the ontological fusion that Pavel discusses, that I in chapter 2 explained as occurring when the user’s actual actions correspond to the fictional actions. The two explanations can be seen as complementary.

Another famous example of a second person narrative is Michel Butor’s *La modification* (Butor 1957). Though the second person is used consistently, the “you” referred to is so clearly defined that it is very hard for the reader to fit in the position of the “you”. While Calvino’s novel starts by leaving the “you” open enough for the casual reader to enter it, Butor shuts the reader out. It would be hard to argue that this text positions the reader as internal to the story, because the “you” of the text does not appear to refer to the reader. The novel begins thus:

If you were afraid of missing the train to whose movement and sound you are now already accustomed again, it is not because you woke up later than you planned this morning (..)

Mieke Bal argues that the lack of exchange between the first and second person mars Butor’s project:

What is lacking, in *La modification*, is that very essential feature of deixis: the reversibility, the exchange, of the first and second person. Not only is the “you” a clearly distinct, even semantically dense individual doing certain things, but the other people in his life, hence, in the fabula, are consistently described in the third person. The “you” is cut off from the others, or cuts them off, so that, rather than mutually confirming one another’s subjectivity, the figure of this “you” lapses into an alienation, that recession of subjectivity, rather than a fulfilment of it. As a consequence, the “you” can never be

identified with the reader, nor is the reader the “you”’s symmetrical counterpart, the “I” (Bal 1997).

It is thus clear that the use of the second person is not always enough to situate the user as internal to the story.

Uses and implications

Models allow us to think clearly about certain aspects of an object, but of course one model can never describe every aspect of every object. If it could it would be the object itself, the Borgesian map of the terrain that is as large as the country it maps.

The model I have proposed is intended to emphasise the user’s position in relation to the text, and necessarily ignores other aspects of texts. It is useful in describing the texts I am interested in here, and it allows a clearer discussion of certain kinds of user engagement in a textual world than is possible with simple notions of interactivity.

It does a good job of explaining particularities of certain texts that fall between the two dominant categories of narrative and game. However, it is less useful in distinguishing between various kinds of games. This is hardly surprising given that games are not narratives, which makes it problematic to use narratological terms like story and discourse about games. Another large group of texts fall into the category that defines the user as external to both story and discourse: almost all traditional literature, cinema and television excludes the reader or viewer from both these levels. The model would be of little use in discussing differences between these texts.

This thesis discusses works that emphasise the interaction between user and work. Looking at these works through the lens of user position in relation to story and discourse we see that they all position the user as internal to the story. Most also situate the user as internal to the discourse, but several have a user position that is only

partially internal to the discourse. This ambiguity is what emphasises the deictic relationship between user and work.

CHAPTER 6 **EXPLOITATIVE FICTIONS: SPAM, SCAMS AND HOAXES**

Ontological interactivity includes the user in the fictional world, and emphasises the relationship between user and work. In stories and art this can lead to a sense of immersion, which can be both pleasurable and seductive for the user. In the readings of *Dream Kitchen* and *Online Caroline* in chapters 2 and 3 I touched upon the control that is implied by this seductive immersion or inclusion in a fictional world, and I also considered power and force in chapter 4's discussion of the second person address to the user.

This chapter further develops the topics of ontological interaction, the user's inclusion in the work and power, but in a different context. While art and narrative are for the most part voluntary pursuits that users engage with for pleasure or out of interest, other works use ontological interaction – or apparent ontological interaction – to exploit the user. This chapter thus discusses exploitative fictions: spam, scams, hoaxes and marketing ploys that present a fictional world that they try to lure the user into. I also explore what happens when the user relates to a specific fictional character rather than with a work as a whole. Relating directly with a fictional character we straddle the boundary between actual and fictional. This blurring of boundaries and our own position between worlds causes endless discussions of what is real or not on the web, as is evident not only in fiction and art but equally in scams, ads and hoaxes.

The examples I'll discuss include the Kaycee Nicole hoax, the Nigerian 419 email scam, bots like Eliza, possibly fictional weblogs and email and popup ads for porn sites and an online casino.

Kaycee Nicole

Kaycee Nicole was a high school student who kept a web diary about her struggle with leukaemia. Kaycee became more and more popular, and maintained friendships not only through her web diary, but also through email and in chat rooms. Her mother Debbie started a companion web diary about caring for a child with cancer. When Kaycee eventually died in 2001, her online friends were devastated. When they found out that Kaycee and Debbie were fictional, they were furious. They felt deceived and used (Geitgey 2001; Powazek 2001; Woning 2001).

The Kaycee Nicole case was neither the first nor the last time fictional characters have been presented and interpreted as being real. Orson Welles' radio production of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* in 1938 is the most well known example of widespread belief that a fiction is true. Welles's Halloween joke was taken as fact by thousands of listeners, who panicked, believing that Martians had attacked the planet Earth and annihilated much of the United States. Welles had dramatised the science fiction story as though it were being reported live on radio. The play started with piano music, which was broken off by announcements that abnormal activities had been observed on Mars, and then that Martian troops had landed in New Jersey. The play became more and more dramatic, with the radio reporter instructing listeners to seek open spaces and avoid congested areas, and culminated in a description of gigantic Martians striding across the Hudson river and demolishing New York. By this point, many listeners had already fled their homes and did not hear the ad break that followed the fictional death of the announcer in New York. According to one survey, as many as 28% of the listeners believed that the play had been a real news report (Cantril, Gaudet and Herzog 1966).

War of the Worlds mimicked news reports while Kaycee used online diaries. Both used genre conventions more often used to present factual information than fiction.

While Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre on the Air created *War of the Worlds* as fiction and as art and entertainment, the unnamed woman who created Kaycee had no obvious motive. She did not make any money out of the elaborate fiction, on the contrary: she sent generous presents to many of her – or rather Kaycee’s – online friends. Kaycee’s creator put a lot of time and care into building and maintaining relationships with her readers. She poured emotions into the role she acted, crying on the phone to van der Woning, for instance, when she was playing the role of Kaycee’s mother Debbie (Woning 2001). For the actual woman who performed as Kaycee, Kaycee was fictional. She constructed and found a set of objects that she used as props in her own game of make-believe: photos of the girl next door, various web sites, presents. Kaycee’s name, personality, age and the nature of her illness were basic tenets that determined what was possible within this fictional world.

Representation and dialogue

Networked communication combines representation with dialogue, and this combination is unfamiliar to us. It confuses us. We’re used to being able to separate representation and dialogue easily.

I propose that when the user enters into a dialogue with a represented or simulated character or characters, a form of ontological interaction occurs. The act of communication spans both actual and fictional worlds. When I write an email to Caroline, for instance, my act of writing an email is both actual and fictional. The action becomes a point of ontological fusion. Dialogue is thus one kind of ontological interaction. All the exploitative fictions discussed in this chapter use dialogue to lure the user into their net.

Many representations are characterised by the impossibility of dialogue. I can beg the heroine in a horror movie to run as much as I like, but she won’t obey me. When

audiences can affect the fictional world that is represented, as in role-playing games and some oral story-telling situations, we tend to think of the situation as a game, a simulation or a dialogue rather than as a representation. These dialogic situations are less often thought of as art than are the closed representations of literature, film and paintings, though this work- or object-based view of art has also been challenged, for instance in concept performance art.

Representation is the standard mode of literate societies and mass media. In medieval times, when most people could not read, the gospel was communicated to the masses using images. Later, with mass literacy in many cultures, print became an important representational medium. Today radio and television serve the same purpose. In *re-presenting* an event, an opinion or a fact to an audience, these media provide one perspective on that which they represent. Though the representation may present its own claims to authority in different ways, such a representation is in itself a claim that “this is”. Individually produced representations such as paintings can be defaced or altered by their audiences. It is sometimes possible to change your own copy of a mass-distributed representation, such as a newspaper or a television broadcast, but without illegal manipulation of the distribution channels, no member of the audience can change a television broadcast or a newspaper. These representations are non-negotiable.

Of course it is possible to answer back, to write letters to the editor, to create one’s own competing representations and to create parodies or homages and distribute them. There is talk-back radio and community television. Yet the representation still remains closed and unchangeable to the majority of listeners and viewers. Sometimes people do break the law and alter the original distribution, too, as in March 2003, when the web site of the Arab television station Al-Jazeera was attacked by American hackers who replaced the site’s content with an image of an American flag.

The web is often used as a channel for one-way representations, but it is also an arena for dialogue. The conventional communication model has arrows pointing in one direction only: a message is encoded by the sender, transmitted through a channel and received by an audience. The audience can be seen as having varying degrees of agency or passivity in this model. In a dialogue the arrows point both ways: both (or several) parties contribute to the process. Dialogues are about a process rather than about a finished whole which is then presented to an audience, although a dialogue can also be presented as representations, as in Plato's *Dialogues* or a play.

The notion of dialogue I'm using here is related to the concept of *deixis*, which I discussed in the previous chapter, but it is more general. Bal sees *deixis* as occurring in representational art (Bal 1999), but although her discussion is interesting, I think her use of *deixis* in this respect is more metaphorical than actual. Dialogue is also more general than interactivity. When I write that dialogue is about a process rather than a finished work, I am also relating it to current theories of networked art and networked communication, where it is the motion of the network that is important, the collaboration and the process rather than the existence of a well-crafted end product (Breeze 2003).

Kaycee Nicole established a dialogue with strong elements of representation as well. The web diaries were clear representations: a one way channel of communication where readers could discuss the representational work among themselves but could not change the work itself. Readers could not change the diaries.

The web combines dialogue and representation. There are images and text, just as in printed, non-dialogic media like newspapers and magazines. Many websites also have dialogic aspects: they may allow users to add their own content, affect the presentation of information, perform transactions and participate in discussions. The same information can often be accessed across several media – for instance, news from

the BBC is now available in several specialised radio and television channels as well as on the web. I can pay bills by telephone or on the web as well as in person at my local branch, and find a phone number by searching a web site, leafing through the printed telephone directory or by sending an SMS text message to the appropriate number.

Tasks that once required interaction with another human are now often mediated by a machine playing the role of a human. When you order a taxi, a recorded voice may answer your call, asking you to speak in the address you would like to be picked up at. Banks charge more for personal service from a real human being, but we're used to dealing with machines in situations where we once dealt with humans. When *Online Caroline* provides a phone number for Caroline, it appears to be a situation that promises dialogue. If you ring the phone number, an answering machine takes your call, and you can leave a message just as you would for any other friend: this is both a representation that replaces true dialogue and at the same time, a realistic interface for dialogue that we know well already. We can use telephones to communicate with machines and databases as well as with humans. The step from that to communicating with fictional characters is not that great. The message I leave for Caroline will never be heard by Caroline (after all, she doesn't exist) but though this dialogue is thwarted, I perform all the actions appropriate to a participant in a dialogue.

Kaycee Nicole is seen as a hoax, not as a fiction or a story or a performance, though it is easy to imagine an art performance that similarly hides its own fictionality but still is thought of as being art. *Davidstill.org* (Still 2002) might be such an example, though part of its effect is the play with reality. Are the photos really of a person named David Still? Can he *really* live in a Dutch suburb called *De Realiteit*? *Davidstill.org* challenges its audience: figure out whether I'm real. The site presents itself as not being intended as art, but there is an awareness that this is taken as art.

Spam and dialogue

Spam is another automated contender for our attention and empathy. Some spam, like this email I received in November 2001, uses fiction, dialogue and narrative quite explicitly to gain visitors:

Hello this is Wendi!

I Lost your e-mails boy i am glad i found the address in my outbox!!

i just went out and bought a webcam and snapped a few pics of me and posted them here be sure to check them out and let me know how you like them!

DO NOT TELL TODD!!!!

He would get really pissed at me for showing anyone these pics. He thinks I took them for him.. :)

love ya!

Wendi

xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo

“Wendi” also provided a link which she invited me to check out. As expected, the link led to a run-of-the-mill porn site of the kind where new windows pop up as soon as you try to exit the site. I couldn’t find any continuation of the narrative suggested by the email in the web site.

Wendi is not the only presumably fictional character to fill my inbox. The same day as her email arrived, I received another email, this time from “Switty”:

Hello my dear Love!!! I'm lost You email, but i'm find with help of my brother, he's cool hacker :)) You can find gallery of photos that I offered here.

Bye

chmok.... love, Switty.....

Switty is less eloquent than Wendi, yet the same approach is used: the email becomes a prop which the receiver can use to generate imaginings about a fictional world. Reading these emails may not make me visit the porn site, but it is almost impossible to read them without at least beginning to imagine the situation that might have produced such emails. Though I may stop playing this game of make-believe as soon as I delete the email, I do begin to play the game and to imagine the fictional world to which this email would belong.

Both emails directly address their receiver, and brief as they are, they present the recipient with a clear role. According to the emails, I have met Wendi and Switty in the past, or perhaps merely corresponded with them, and probably I have flirted with them. Wendi assumes that I know and could contact someone called Todd, who is presumably her boyfriend. Playing along with the game I can imagine that I really have met Wendi and Switty somewhere. The fantasy can be just as satisfying if I imagine that their emails were meant for someone else, but I will be allowed to eavesdrop and perhaps even build a relationship with these women. Pornography is an industry that sells fantasies and props for games of make-believe.

Rather than presenting themselves as complete, these emails pretend to be episodes in an ongoing dialogue where I am an equal party. Their very effect lies in the fact that they are *not* complete works. They invite me to continue a dialogue by making my own contribution to it.

My inbox fills with another kind of fiction and narrative spam as well: the Nigerian 419 scams. These emails are framed as requests for assistance from a person who has recently lost power, and who needs to smuggle a large amount of illicit money out of the country. To do this, the person would like you – the random recipient of the email – to help, by allowing him to transfer the money to your bank account in order to get it out of the country. In return you are promised a significant cut. The scam is based on an older scam known as The Spanish Prisoner, and is known as the 419 scam because that is the code by which the FBI identify it. According to an article in *Slate*, the ploy earns Nigerians close to US \$100 million: “No longer the sole domain of professional criminals, 419 has become a cozy family business, Nigeria's version of the Greek diner or Irish pub.” (Koerner 2002) Here is an excerpt from a typical example of the first emails sent out in these scams:

I am HIS HIGHNESS HAMED ISA BIN SULMAN AL KHALIFA, Emir of the state of Bahrain.

I got to know you through a foreign trade office in London during my official trip last year.

I am making this contact to you to inquire from you if you can assist me manage some investment for me in your country. Actually all I want from you is to be my manager abroad and partner. I would like you to invest in Properties(Real Estate) and company shares and other lucrative ventures of your interest for me.

I have sixty Million United States Dollars (US\$60,000,000.00) into a VAULT with a Security Finance Company abroad, but due to many commitments I can not travel out of my domain for the claim, hence I contacted you to assist me make the claim on my behalf. I will provide you with all the necessary documents to enable you represent me as my business manager to make the claim by signing the necessary document for onward transfer of the money into your account which you will use for the investment.

Here the role of “you” is much more open than in Wendi and Switty’s emails, however, this initial email asks the recipient to reply. The rest of the scam is conducted through personal email correspondence, and sometimes even by telephone. Here the scammer performs his or her role throughout – only the initial email is automated and sent randomly. This performance has been documented thoroughly by recipients of such emails, like Buddy Weiserman and Elizabeth Hanes, who have received the initial email in the scam and have then decided to scam the scammer (Hanes 2001; Weiserman 2001; Haxial 2002). They have assumed more or less parodic roles, pretended to go along with the scam and published all their correspondence online to the great enjoyment of their readers.

There are many scams like the Nigerian 419 scam that don’t depend on the net at all. Other means of correspondence can be used, such as letters, telephone and fax, or scams are conducted in person. The success and proliferation of 419 is in part due to the ease of sending huge quantities of emails at hardly any cost, though the scam was also common in the early 90s, using faxes and typewritten letters instead of emails. The tactics used in both the 419 spam, the spam emails from Wendi and Switty and in the casino ad are all similar to those used to ensnare the reader of *Online Caroline*: all address the user and simulate a dialogue. They simulate deixis. They provide a role for the user that is on the same ontological level as the protagonist of the fiction. As

discussed earlier, this creates what Thomas Pavel calls an ontological fusion between the world of the user and the fictional world (Pavel 1986). The boundaries between the actual user and the fictional role the user is playing become unclear, and so the boundaries between fictional and actual world are hard to make out. We become gullible.

An ad or a chatroom

While I was searching the web for information about web hoaxes an ad for an online casino appeared in a popup window in my browser⁶. The ad proved to be highly relevant to the topic I was researching: it was a simulation of a chatroom where fictional characters mention the casino in what appears to be the middle of a conversation. A large space at the top of the window was followed by the following text displayed in the font Courier:

Caroline> So anyway, that's my story today

Beneath this was a smaller space with a blinking cursor, looking just like the space in which you type your own comments in a chatting environment. Though I could see from the title bar and the surrounding graphics that this was an ad, Caroline's brief reference to an ongoing conversation and a story intrigued me. Rather than close the browser window immediately as I usually do when ad windows open up, I moused over it wondering whether it could possibly be a real chatroom that was perhaps sponsored by the casino. I clicked on the blinking cursor to see if I could write something there.

Instantly, another line appeared in the chat space:

Sharon7up> wow! Looks like you could use a little fun

⁶ The ad was for the online casino 888.com, and appeared in a pop-up window when I was reading another website on 6 December 2002. The ad was from doubleclick.net, but when I returned to the URL I had bookmarked the next day, another ad had taken its place, and I have not been able to find it since.

I clicked again, curious though I realised that this was probably scripted. But at this click, the illusion fell apart as all the remaining lines came tumbling out at once:

Caroline> But I can't go out now - I'm waiting for the cable technician

Joni2go> You don't need to go out! We're going to play craps online - why don't you join us?

Caroline> I don't know... is it safe?

Sharon7up> of course it's safe! You know me - I only go with the best, and 888.com is the best place to play casino games online. You can play as long as you like for free!

The content of the ad is not particularly original. The technique of a staged situation where a person's friends convince her to buy or try the product is familiar from television and print ads. What is interesting here is the seamlessness of the ad. It disguises itself as a window on a real chatroom, complete with the blinking cursor that deceitfully promises I can add my words to this conversation. We are presented with a fragment of a narrative. Caroline's first line, the teaser that lured me into clicking the ad, referred to a story she had just told but that I was too late to hear. Caroline has the final word too, but though we are told no more, the story appears to continue without us:

Caroline> Sounds really great :) maybe I will join you. You know, that reminds me...

After reading this I clicked the window again, just in case there was more, but it just started over, looping back to an empty chat window except for Caroline's first line: "So anyway, that's my story today."

Fictional characters

Like her namesake in *Online Caroline*, the casino Caroline is a fictional character represented through a digital medium. Though the code that scripts or generates each of these Carolines is probably inseparable from the rest of the code controlling the system the characters exist in, I perceive these Carolines as discrete entities and as personalities. When I see online Caroline in the web cam, or read her emails, or when I see casino Caroline's opening line, I imagine each of these as a person. Fictional,

perhaps, but still a person, just as I imagine Peter Pan as a person rather than as a mass of words.

My relationship with Caroline of *Online Caroline* is that of a simulated friendship. What is my relationship with casino Caroline? Well, there is no actual interaction between her and me. What I see is simply an animation of a chat session that has been programmed to show me a line at a time as I click on it. There is a space that looks as though I could type my own contributions to the conversation into it, but clicking on it merely makes the preset animation jog onto the next step. However, I *imagine* the possibility of being able to communicate with the people that are represented: Caroline, Sharon7up and Joni2go. I imagine the possibility of social interaction between us, though I don't necessarily imagine the words and sentences of an actual dialogue.

Lisbeth Klastrup has developed a typology of different kinds of interactivity to describe virtual worlds such as those found in *Everquest* and MUDs (Klastrup 2003). The worlds of Kaycee Nicole, Wendi, Switty, His Highness Hamed Isa bin Sulman al Khalifa, Sharon7up and Caroline the would-be gambler are not virtual worlds like *Everquest*, but they are fictional worlds and they negotiate various relationships to the actual world. *Online Caroline* has fooled some of its users into thinking it's real (Armstrong 2000), but is in interviews and other contexts presented as art and fiction. It has even garnered arts funding and awards. The email spammers and the casino ad construct fictional worlds to entice customers or fool people and with the clear goal of earning money. Kaycee Nicole was created for unknown reasons, but the fiction has never been presented as art or been shown to have given any material benefit to its creator.

Often we are uncertain of a world's status as fictional or actual, as in the case of Salam Pax or Lt Smash (Lt. Smash 2003; Pax 2003). It is entirely possible, even

probable that Salam Pax is the pseudonym of an actual Iraqi citizen who blogged from Bagdad as the war on Iraq began in 2003, just as it is entirely possible that Lt Smash is the pseudonym of a genuine US soldier who blogged from the front. Yet discussions have raged as to whether these two bloggers are hoaxes, fictions or propaganda (Walker 2003a). People have searched to find a boundary, cracks in the illusion that would prove these worlds to be fictional, but though IP numbers and information about ownership of the domain blogs and photos are hosted on can be tracked down, so far they can neither prove the sites to be authentic or fraudulent, actual or fictional.

Perhaps possible worlds theory would be the best way of mapping these potential or simply possible worlds. Like the possible worlds of fiction, the worlds of Salam Pax and Lt Smash share many qualities with our actual world. our world, Salam's world and Smash's world the geography of the world is the same, the war is the same (though seen from different perspectives) and the same media broadcast the same stories. Salam watches BBC World and Al Jazeera just as we may. A fictional world departs from the actual world in certain aspects. Harry Potter's world shares London and world history and geography with the actual world, but the existence of magic and wizards has been added. The world of James Bond has even more in common with the actual world, but has added some people and probably some drama to it.

While James Bond and Harry Potter are clearly contained within books, films and merchandise, Salam Pax's possible world has leaky borders. In addition to his weblog, he exists in emails sent to and quoted by some of his readers, in the IP number he posts from which he can be tracked down, in the details of his email address and his missing friend Raed's email profile at yahoo.com. While Harry Potter's world is overlaid our actual world, Salam Pax's permeates it. If he is authentic, then of course this is no different from the way each of us permeates, affects and interprets our world. Kaycee Nicole's world did not have clear boundaries either. She was a fictional character

inserted into the actual world. She participated in chat sessions, wrote emails and published a web diary. The people who interacted with her did so as themselves in the actual world. This is what the Nigerian spammers aim for too.

Alternate reality gaming, or unfiction, is a movement in entertainment that dissolves the boundaries that usually delineate fictional works from the actual world deliberately. Players of these games are usually aware of the fictionality of their game, but enjoy the fact that clues can be found on apparently authentic websites, or that a gaming event might take place at any time without warning that this is part of the game you're playing. *Majestic*, the game that plays you that I mentioned in the chapter on *Online Caroline*, was one such game, but it was discontinued after only a few months. Other games have been developed as publicity for movies and conventional computer games, and fans and players share information about various games in discussion groups and mailing lists. Unfiction.com is one of the sites collating information about the phenomenon, which according to the site's history of the genre is only a few years old.

How then does our interaction with a fictional world without clear boundaries against the actual world differ from our interaction with a clearly bordered fictional world?

Everquest is a clearly separate world where users role-play characters that belong to the virtual world. Though players may invest a lot of actual time, emotions and even money in their characters, it is easy to separate a character in *Everquest* from the actual player who controls that character. The worlds have clear boundaries.

Let me try to describe the characters in our dramas using Kjaerulff's terminology, despite the lack of boundaries between worlds. The Nigerian emailers and Kaycee Nicole would be Player Characters, or instances of a Player-in-Avatar: they are roles played or performed by humans. Our two Carolines, on the other hand, would be NPCs,

Non Playing Characters. They are bots, pieces of software built to simulate a human – or rather, to simulate a character on the same ontological domain as the player’s character. NPCs and their reactions and characteristics are programmed by humans, but no human controls them once they are up and running. But our Carolines are different from NPCs, as well. They are inseparable from the works they belong to, and on the level of code have no independent existence. An NPC in *LambdaMOO* at first glance looks like a Player Character, that is, an avatar controlled by a human. It can be duplicated or changed without making changes to the rest of the world. With a little effort, it can be ported to another MOO running the same basic code as *LambdaMOO*. An NPC in a proprietary system like *Everquest* probably can’t be ported to another world, but it is represented in basically the same way as the avatars of human players.

In virtual worlds like *Everquest* there are no mere onlookers. To enter the world, you yourself have to play a role. You are a player character, and your representation in the world is identical to other player characters and to many NPCs as well. How then are we represented in the fictional worlds of *Online Caroline* or the Nigerian spams?

As the user or human participant, I’m not directly represented in *Online Caroline*. Caroline refers to me and addresses me, but I can’t put up my own web cam in the same space as she has hers. I do fill out forms, and the pages of questions that I answer are the place in which we are most equally represented. For the forms I’ve already filled out, my answers are set out alongside Caroline’s (see Figure 8 on page 72). In this small space we’re almost equal.

In the casino ad I am not represented at all. However, because I am familiar with the chat interface, I assume that I *can* be represented, or at least I assume this if I take the chat interface at face value. It looks as though I could type into the box with the blinking cursor, and my words would be displayed in the communal chat space, along with Caroline’s, Joni2go’s and Susan7up’s words. In fact typing is impossible, but if I

never test the possibility I may continue to think that it is real. There is a promise of potential representation, which is, after all, a familiar aspect of online communication with other humans: I am a member of several email lists which I never post to, but the knowledge that I *could* post is important to me. In the casino ad I am represented as a lurker. This is a perfectly valid mode of existence on the net: you are present, but invisible.

Interacting with a machine

What if we think of the fictional characters as machines that are partners in interaction? In all these works, my interaction, or perceived interaction, with individual characters is crucial to my engagement with the work.

When I engage with *Online Caroline* my interaction with the character Caroline is as important to me as my interaction with the work as a whole. In works like *afternoon* (Joyce 1990), *Magic-tree.com* (Lander 2002) or the net.art classic *jodi.org* the user interacts with the work as a whole and finds out about fictional characters while remaining safely outside of the fictional world. When fictional characters relate directly to the user, the user is drawn into the fictional world. Rather than interacting with the work (the kind of interaction that Lisbeth Klastrup (2003) specifies as information retrieval, manipulation and navigation) the user enters the fictional world that is prescribed by the work, and interacts with the fictional characters that inhabit that world.

Social interactions are increasingly being mechanised and automated as are many other aspects of our society. Social relationships between actual humans are represented by networks, ratings and reputation management in online social networking systems like Friendster.com, Ryze.org and Everyonesconnected.com. It is a cliché by now that television has replaced family conversations. Fortune-tellers and

prostitutes peddle their wares by telephone, and various kinds of robot toys not only demand virtual feeding and nurturing, but will tell stories or fight other robot toys.

Perhaps then the simulation of characters should be seen as a genre unto itself. Dolls would be the origin of this genre. Software bots like *Eliza* (Weizenbaum 1966) are the more ambitious members of the family, as they attempt to convince humans they communicate with that they are humans too. Each year the Loebner contest chooses the most convincing human simulation from a host of software programs designed to respond in writing to a human partner's input. *Eliza*, developed in 1966, uses the simple technique of posing as a Rogerian psychologist, which allows her to turn back anything the user says according to a simple set of rules. The user communicates with *Eliza* through a text interface that is similar to that we saw in *Zork*:

- > Hello, I am Eliza.
- * Are you human?
- > Would you prefer if I were not human?
- * I think you are a computer.
- > Does it please you to believe I am a computer? (Weizenbaum, Wallace and Dunlop 1999)

Online Caroline's rules are much less flexible than those that *Eliza* follows. *Eliza*'s rules are general enough that the user can type almost anything and *Eliza* will be able to respond in a more perform a very limited set of actions. Users can ask *Eliza* questions, though her answer will probably be another question, but in *Online Caroline* user's can only *answer* questions that have already been asked. There are usually only two or three possible answers to a question, and rather than typing them freely, the user is given a multiple choice questionnaire. Since there are so few user options, *Online Caroline* can have fully scripted responses to each of the possible user inputs. Yet even with this very limited flexibility, many readers have thought that *Caroline* was a real human, just as others have been fooled, for a while, by *Eliza* and other bots.

Online Caroline and casino Caroline may not be full machine subjects but they are at the very least machine-projections of social partners. Let me back up a little and discuss the more general idea of machines as social beings.

Machines simulating humans

In 1950 Alan Turing wrote an article describing a game that would become known as “The Turing Test” (Turing 1950). No machine has yet passed the test, but it is still a frequently invoked measure of artificial intelligence. Turing starts his essay by asking the question “Can machines think?” He soon discards this question as too vague and impossible to answer, and replaces it with a new problem:

The new form of the problem can be described in terms of a game that we call the 'imitation game'. It is played with three people, a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex. The interrogator stays in a room apart from the other two. The object of the game for the interrogator is to determine which of the other two is the man and which is the woman. He knows them by labels X and Y, and at the end of the game he says either 'X is A and Y is B' or 'X is B and Y is A'. The interrogator is allowed to put questions to A and B thus:

C: Will X please tell me the length of his or her hair?

Now suppose X is actually A [the man], then A must answer. It is A's object in the game to try and cause C [the interrogator] to make the wrong identification. His answer might therefore be

'My hair is shingled, and the longest strands are about nine inches long.'

In order that tones of voice may not help the interrogator the answers should be written, or better still, typewritten. The ideal arrangement is to have a teleprinter communicating between the two rooms. Alternatively the question and answers can be repeated by an intermediary. The object of the game for the third player (B [the woman]) is to help the interrogator. The best strategy for her is probably to give truthful answers. She can add such things as 'I am the woman, don't listen to him!' to her answers, but it will avail nothing as the man can make similar remarks.

We now ask the question, 'What will happen when a machine takes the part of A [the man] in this game?' Will the interrogator decide wrongly as often when the game is played like this as he does when the game is played between a man and a woman? These questions replace our original, 'Can machines think?' (Turing 1950: 433-434)

The question Turing then suggests as more useful than “Can machines think?” is basically, “Can machines role-play?” The ability to play roles, to pretend, to engage in make-believe, is arguably the most human quality there is. We are social animals. The

seemingly most basic human needs of food and shelter in most cases depend on our ability to adopt social roles and fit into society. In most societies expulsion from the group is the worst punishment of all, often equivalent with death. Children learn to behave acceptably by imitating the people around them; by seeing a role and trying to fill it. As adults we learn to play many roles: parent, lover, provider, colleague, friend, teacher, student, daughter, sister. We are experts at role-playing and know exactly which role to play at which times. We scream on a roller-coaster but never on the bus (unless the bus behaves like a roller-coaster). We know we shouldn't swear at old ladies. Sometimes several roles are available to us: silent young woman, confident professional, pushy bitch. Sometimes our roles are in conflict with each other. We play roles constantly.

Today machines can compute numbers and disarm bombs and gather food, and they can do it faster and more efficiently than we can, if we program them properly. Role-playing is still the final frontier, as in Turing's day. Computers can be programmed to pretend to be humans so well that they trick many people into thinking they really are humans – if our only communication with the machine is via the net, say, and only textual.

Turing wrote of this imagined skill at role-playing as a test of computers in 1950. Today our experience of computers is complex and personal. Computers can be intimate, personal tools accompanying us in myriad tasks and situations. I invest my computer with my own subjectivity and with a feeling that it has an agency of its own. My computer is a private space that functions as an extension of me, “my outboard brain” (Doctorow 2002), and at the same time it acts like a distinct other:

The computer itself, even without any fantasy content, is an enchanted object. Sometimes it can act like an autonomous, animate being, sensing its environment and carrying out internally generated processes, yet it can also seem like an extension of our own consciousness, capturing our words through the keyboard and displaying them on the screen as fast as we can think them. (Murray 1997: 99)

Narratives and computers are “ambiguous psychological locations”, Murray argues, “something safely outside ourselves (..) upon which we can project our feelings”. (100)

Donna Haraway writes that it is possible to have social relationships with machines:

I insist that social relationships include nonhumans as well as humans as *socially* (or what is the same thing for this odd congeries, sociotechnically) active partners. All that is unhuman is not un-kind, outside kinship, outside the orders of signification, excluded from trading in signs and wonders. (Haraway 1997: 8)

This is probably not exactly the kind of relationship we have with Online Caroline. I have something approaching a social relationship with my laptop computer, though our relationship is closer to that between a human and a dog than one between two humans. I tell my computer off when it won't behave, caress it when I approve of it, groom it until I am happy with its appearance and train it to do the things I want it to do. My computer and I have an intimate dependency on each other. Perhaps it won't really mind when I buy a new computer and leave my current one gathering dust in a closet, but I depend on it for communication with other humans, entertainment and work. Caroline does not act as a computer, on the contrary: she simulates a human being. It makes as much sense to think of her as a simulated human as as one of Haraway's non-humans.

Perhaps my computer's unyielding non-humanity is the reason why my relationship with it is so strong. It doesn't pretend to be human, as Caroline does. Machines that are indistinguishable from humans have fascinated and terrified us for centuries. Intelligent machines, conscious machines, emotional machines, cyborgs, androids, robots: our stories and games tell of all these. Pinocchio wanted to be a real boy, similarly to, though less threateningly than, the clay Golem of legend who, learning what people know, wanted to be a person. Humanoid robots in Asimov's science fiction were benevolent only because they had been programmed with strict rules making them unable to harm humans.

In the popular late 1990s film *The Matrix*, a traditional fear of science fiction is reiterated: machines have taken over the world and made humans their slaves. *The Matrix* presents a dual structure between the real world, where humans are bred and kept in tubs, feeding the machines with their bio-energy. To keep the humans happy and alive, an extensive simulation is fed to their brains so that the humans think that they are living in a late 20th century world. The machines generate infinitely replicating simulated humans as agents to act within the simulated world. Endless copies of this simulated Agent Smith fight Neo and other humans who have become aware of the real state of affairs.

Caroline could be seen as a frightening, machinic Agent Smith, a simulated human who can step into our perceived reality in order to control us. Perhaps this is why people are so furious when they discover they have believed in a hoax website or thought that *Online Caroline* was real? Our anger may be a simple self-defensive mechanism, because we know that our dependency on our machines carries with it a very real risk.

Immersed or trapped?

Perhaps this has changed in the last few years. The web is continuous and we use it daily for communication, information and entertainment. Murray describes a Holodeck which is a clearly bordered work of art that users choose to engage with. The fictional worlds presented in this chapter are far less clearly outlined. They arrive in the user's email inbox uninvited, they are episodes torn out of sequence and never presented as whole, complete works. They are suggestions of fictional worlds where the user is often unsure even as to their status as fictional or actual. What is the user's position in relation to these worlds?

Immersion is the feeling of being inside a fictional world. Feeling immersed relies on what Coleridge called “the suspension of disbelief”, but which is perhaps more properly “the pretension of belief”, as Pavel dubs it (Pavel 1986), or in Janet Murray’s words, “the active creation of belief” (Murray 1997: 110). Walton’s theory of fictional works also stresses this, emphasising our pretence: we feel part of a fictional world because we pretend to be part of it, and because we generate that world through our game of make-believe.

The concept of the avatar is frequently used to avoid seeing the actual user as internal to the fictional world. The avatar is inside the fictional world, and I control it like a puppet. If we try to align the concept of avatar with Walton’s make-believe, the avatar is a role we play. Pavel might call it the projection of our egos into the fictional world.

Interestingly, the word *avatar* originally meant just the opposite of an actual person’s extension into fiction. On the contrary, an avatar is a term from Hindu mythology, and is the embodiment of a deity on earth. Had Christianity used the term, we might have called Jesus an avatar. In its original sense, then, the term avatar encompassed the simultaneity of this dual existence, this dual ontology as Pavel calls it, without forcing a choice between actual and sacred.

The avatar, in this interpretation, need not even be a “projected ego”, but is a tool “transmitting signification to a parallel world”, as Gregory Little writes in *The Avatar Manifesto*. This view could easily coexist with the narrative communication model of an actual reader and writer both clearly distanced from each other and from the text itself.

[T]he avatar is a mythic figure with its origin in one world and projected or passing through a form of representation appropriate to a parallel world. The avatar is a delegate, a tool or instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world. (..) the original remains in its originary environment while sending a tool of signification, the avatar, into a second. (..) The avatar is essentially a visual representation, a virtual instrument or imaged prosthesis of its referent – the user, and so fundamentally related to linguistic signs and representational icons. (Little 1998)

In digital media, avatars are our projections into fictional worlds or other mediated environments such as chat rooms. As Janet Murray notes, there are several stories about readers entering a story, or people entering other fictional worlds. In these stories, the reader rarely has an avatar, but enters fully, as herself. Often time in the actual world ceases: the paradox of existing in two worlds at once is solved by making the time scales of the worlds different from each other. The protagonist is fully absent from the actual world, but her absence is not discovered because no actual time passes. This is the case in C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series (the children enter a world that is not posited as fictional in the actual world of the novels, but that is clearly separated from the actual world of mid-twentieth century England), and in E. Nesbit's *The Magic City* (where the fictional world has been constructed in blocks by one of the children in the story). There are many stories about the places Pavel calls ontological fusion points. These places are magic places where two worlds meet, where humans may find themselves slipping into the land of faery, perhaps never to return, or to return a hundred years later when all their friends and family are dead and gone, as Rip van Winkle did.

Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* is an example of such a novel. The protagonist Bastian, a lonely young boy, finds and reads a book which is also called *The Neverending Story*. Bastian's story and the story of the fictional world in the book he is reading alternate in the novel. This book that Bastian reads (the book described in the book that we read) tells the tale of Fantastica, a fictional world where the Childlike Empress will die unless a human names her, and thereby enters the fictional world. Fantastica is thus a fictional world twice removed from our actual world: it is a fiction inside a fiction. It becomes clear, as we read, that that human who must save the Childlike Empress is Bastian. But he is frightened of becoming trapped in the fiction, and hesitates, upon which the hero Atreyu says

‘He just doesn’t want to come here. He just doesn’t care about you or Fantastica. You don’t mean a thing to him.’

The Childlike Empress stared wide-eyed at Atreyu.

‘No! No! Bastian cried out. ‘You mustn’t think that! It’s not that at all! Oh, please, please, don’t think that!’ (Ende 1984: 150)

Bastian still doesn’t dare to enter the fictional world, and so the Childlike Empress makes the story restart from the beginning, right from the beginning, so that Bastian finds himself reading about himself finding the book and beginning to read it. Rather than be caught in this endless loop of reading he gives the Childlike Empress her name and enters Fantastica to become a saviour of the fictional world.

Our fear of being trapped in a fictional world is reiterated in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Rowlings 1998), where first Ginny and later Harry enter an old diary that turns out to be enchanted by Voldemort, Harry’s arch enemy. The younger version of Voldemort that exists inside the diary exploits Ginny’s insecurity and empathy, controlling her in ways that affect the actual world of the novel and that endanger the whole wizarding world.

In both *Harry Potter* and *The Neverending Story*, the readers’ *care* for the fictional characters is essential to their being sucked into the fiction. Ginny felt sorry for the boy in the diary, while Bastian is mortified that the characters he is reading about think that he doesn’t care about them. Kaycee Nicole likewise appeared to feed upon her audience’s care and sympathy.

Making readers *care* about the fictional characters has always been crucial to fiction, as is evident from Aristotle’s demand that tragedy should bring forth the spectator’s pity and fear (Whalley, Baxter and Atherton 1997). With the power to make readers care comes a fear of caring too much, as we see in these stories where (fictional) readers literally enter the stories they’re reading, and in novels like *Don Quixote* and

Madame Bovary, where readers want their own lives to be like a novel (Cervantes Saavedra 1950; Flaubert 1950).

In literature the world entered is often a world described in a story, and so the ontological fusion is described as being in narrative itself. Representation is often posited as a window to another world. Often, this window is conceived as transparent but impossible to open or go through.

Metalepsis

The motif of readers and viewers entering the represented world is common enough for Genette to call this kind of transition of a character from one diegetic level to another *metalepsis* (Genette 1980: 234-237). Yet in the examples above from literature and film this metalepsis is always *represented*; it remains within the textual world. I can read about Bastian who enters the world he is reading about, but I can't enter either Bastian's world or the world in which the Childlike Empress exists. With digital media, as with games, the boundaries between my world and the represented world are much less clear.

Classical representational art presents physical boundaries between the viewer and the object. There is the canvas and frame of a painting, the paper, ink and binding of a book, the stage in theatre, the screen of the cinema, the television set and the computer. Within these material frames and boundaries we have formal ones, like the genre conventions that let us separate the different worlds of television: news, commercials, soap operas, reality TV. Some representational art refuses this separation from the viewer, dispensing with material boundaries all together: as in sculpture, frescos, architecture, music, virtual reality, installation art and street theatre.

Janet Murray writes about immersion in electronic stories and games, and asks:

How will we know what to do when we jump into the screen? How will we avoid ripping apart the fabric of the illusion? (Murray 1997: 106)

She answers her question by giving examples of various ways in which an immersive experience can be structured, and also talks of “threshold objects” that are in a sense between worlds. The mouse and keyboard can be seen as threshold objects, influencing both worlds (108), as are game world objects that we are able to control in predictable ways from our world (112).

Fusion

The fictional worlds of Kaycee Nicole, the Nigerian 419 scam, the popup casino ad and the emails from Wendi and Switty do not require threshold objects. We don’t need to “jump into the screen” in order to feel immersed in these worlds. Rather than entering the fictional worlds of these characters we engage in a dialogue with fictional inhabitants of those worlds.

Perhaps metalepsis has become so common in films and literature because this bridging of worlds is familiar to us. Ringing a friend in Spain or Australia I establish a dialogue between inhabitants of worlds that in many ways are quite separate, although both are actual by common distinctions. Lt Smash’s weblog is as real – or fictional – to me as Kaycee Nicole’s diaries were, or as *Online Caroline* appears to be.

For now, Caroline, Kaycee Nicole, Wendi and their siblings are for the most part benign simulations of humans. They are created by humans and automated by machines, and there is little formal difference between these characters and the more explicitly fictional simulations of humans we are familiar with from popular culture: Lara Croft, Peter Pan, Luke Skywalker. Caroline, Kaycee Nicole and Wendi are different because they enter our everyday life, just as Mr Andersen and his copies enter the simulation of ordinary human life in *The Matrix*.

Participating in a dialogic relationship with fictional characters requires an element of trust. I am willing to enter Caroline’s world, in *Online Caroline*, because I

know that it is fictional and trust that my surrender of control is limited. *Online Caroline* plays with the boundaries of my actual world, but does not affect my actual friendships, my income, my home or my family. If David's boss came knocking on my door, forcing me to eat pineapples, I would probably not be as enthusiastic about having trusted this fiction.

Sometimes the allure of ontological interaction is used to trap us in a fiction, as in the Nigerian 419 scam. Here the user may indeed become trapped just as Bastian is trapped in the fictional world of *Fantastica*. Perhaps the victims of the Kaycee Nicole hoax felt trapped just in the same way.

CHAPTER 7 **CLICK HERE TO KILL BIN LADEN**

This chapter discusses a series of political web games that make statements about international politics. The Bin Laden games appeared right after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, and are ritualised slayings of the man assumed to have masterminded the attacks. Other games I discuss present the horror of the subsequent wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, and simulate the increased surveillance of citizens and the treatment of captive terrorists.

My main focus when examining these games is control and restriction. While commercial games rarely make the user's lack of control a theme, it is an important motif in almost all these political games, as it is in the interactive art works I discuss in other chapters of this thesis.

It has been questioned whether political games or games dealing with ethical issues are possible at all (Frasca 2001a). There are not many examples of overtly political computer games, though it can be argued that any game carries with it an implicit ideology. The surge of non-commercial, political web games in response to September 11 and subsequent events is therefore very significant and suggests that games are becoming a popular medium for expression as well as of entertainment.

Because of the great cost of developing a full scale computer game, games have mostly been developed by the commercial gaming industry, and their main goal is of course to make money. There are also many small-scale games that are made by gamers or as part of marketing and branding strategies and shared on the web or distributed informally through networks of friends. By the turn of the century, tools like Flash and Shockwave made simple game development easier than ever, and community sites on

the web, along with personal sites, gave these grass root games efficient distribution channels.

Community-based games

The political web games I've found are all developed by individuals rather than by a commercial or even political organisation. They are small, taking a matter of hours or days to make and minutes to play. They have all been made quickly in response to current events, and they have simple premises, gameplay and imagery. Some of the games are published on personal web sites, while others have been uploaded to community sites.

Newgrounds.com is one of the largest and most popular of the community sites that focus on web games. Members of Newgrounds upload Flash games and animations, play the games uploaded by other members, and discuss the merits and flaws of these games. Each game is displayed with author information and the author's comments about the game, and the number of reviews for each title is often in the hundreds. The reviews are usually very brief and often inane or abusive. Still, they can be pithy and to the point, and the criticism can be quite constructive. Here is a typical comment to *Bad Dudes vs. Bin Laden*: "i like the part when u kick him in the nuts and the finishing move but add more people to it" ("User comments", Fulp 2001) This review is unsophisticated, but specifies the game's good qualities and offers constructive criticism. The community also recognises development in individual contributors' work, and reviews often discuss a work in relation to its author's previous creations. Also it's clear that the reviewer assumes that the review will be read by the game's author, and that the author will consider advice and perhaps change either this game or future games. Few reviews discuss the political aspect of the games other than to crow that

they like kicking Bin Laden in the nuts. I suppose that is a political commentary of sorts, and its lack of sophistication does match that of the game.

The games at Newgrounds are made by individuals or small groups of friends, and they are quick and fairly easy to make. Because of this ease, Flash games have become a medium in which opinions and feelings can be fairly easily expressed. It is clear from the author's statements at Newgrounds that most of the political web games are created not only as a form of self-expression but as a ritual or self-therapy. This ritual experience appears to be shared by the players of the games.

I had this need to see Bin Laden die! I made this game so I could see it over and over. Splatter his ass all over the desert! ("Author's comments" Lippard 2001)

This is my little way to vent my anger and pain about what happened at the World Trade Center in New York. I hope it will put a smile or two on people's faces. I'd like to thank everyone for the overwhelming positive reactions. ("Author's comments" Bregman 2001)

After September 11 so many games about Bin Laden were uploaded to Newgrounds that special themed categories were made for the games. A few months later a more general "War on Terrorism" category was added as well. People outside of the Newground community were alerted to the games by links on discussion forums, weblogs and news sites. Within a few weeks *Wired* and *Le Monde* published articles about the Bin Laden games (Benner 2001; Jardonnet 2001), and general interest community sites like Metafilter.com and Plastic.com started discussing the games.

Other games were published on personal web sites or on smaller community sites. One of the most popular games, *New York Defender*, was posted to a French site for web games, Uzinagaz.com. This site appears to belong to a group of game developers rather than being an open community like Newgrounds. Gonzalo Frasca posted *Kabul Kaboom!* to his personal site Ludology.org, and *Ashcroft Online 1.0* and *Gulf War 2* are both from another personal site, Idleworm.com. *Bin Laden Liquors* was first published at Fieler.com, a site belonging to the games creator. By 2003, that site only showed links

to casinos and pornsites. The game is still available in multiple copies at many other sites, though.

Most of the games from Newgrounds are pro-war, and the reviewers' comments are often harshly critical of liberal and pacifist views. Most participants in the community appear to be American and there is a lot of emphasis on the post-September 11 American brand of patriotism. *New York Defender* is French and more ambiguous. Later games on the Uzinagaz site, like the lesser known *New York Defender 2*, are strikingly apolitical despite their setting. *New York Defender 2* presents the player with a map of Manhattan and a tiny surveillance plane that is controlled with the player's arrow keys. When the player steers the surveillance plane close to passenger jets, they light up green or red. The red ones have been hijacked and must be shot down; the green ones are innocent and must not be shot down. The game is macabre, but it is simply presented as a technical challenge. The game may have received so little attention because of its lacking political stance, but it is more likely to have won its obscurity due to the gameplay being slow, repetitive and unchallenging.

The games by Frasca and from *Idleworm* are overtly critical of the aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq, and of the increasing surveillance and control of ordinary citizens after September 11. There does not appear to be a game community for this political viewpoint. Community sites like Newgrounds are more right-wing and generally games posted there express right-wing sympathies. Left-wing satires like those from Frasca and *Idleworm* are posted on personal sites and like the Bin Laden games, have been publicised on discussion forums and weblogs, as well as on political and academic mailing lists.

There are far fewer anti-war games than there are pro-war games. This is consistent with Frasca's research on games about the Holocaust:

Interestingly, as far as we know, the only games that explore the Holocaust are underground pro-Nazi videogames. These games, while not extremely popular, receive

sporadic media attention as they emerge, like Camus' pestilent rats, from their hideaways in the Internet. In one game in particular, which was available in many European BBSes during the early nineties, the player was offered to take the role of a concentration camp administrator and had to coordinate mass murders. (Frasca 2001a: 173)

The games we see at Newgrounds are supportive of the dominant US regime rather than of the Nazis, and in late 2001 the basic theme of brutalising bin Laden was hardly underground or seen as criminal as neo-Nazis are. However some of the games are sadly reminiscent of the concentration camp game Frasca describes. *Al Quaidamon* allows the player to beat up the prisoner, who is of course a suspected terrorist and not an innocent civilian arrested because of his or her race.

Frasca suggests a possible answer to the question of why there is no humanist game about the Holocaust: "a computer game through the eyes of a Holocaust victim might be perceived as even more monstrous than a neo-nazi game" {Frasca, 2001 #107@173}. This seems to be consistent with the criticism of *New York Defender*, which does not portray gratuitous maiming, as being "insensitive" (Discussion on *Metafilter.com*, 7 October 2001).

Goals and hindrances

Ludo, Chess and *Space Invaders* are all games that present the player with goals that are difficult to attain because of hindrances in the form of puzzles, dexterity challenges and luck. The goal of *Ludo*, for instance, is to get all your tokens to the centre of the board before anyone else can. This goal is meaningless outside of the gaming situation. Seen from outside of the game, the goal is trivial. It can be simply achieved by simply lifting up your tokens and moving them. Doing that, of course, would completely spoil the game, but it demonstrates that the hindrances between player and goal are both elective and the point of the game.

Games rely on restrictions. Games must restrict the player's freedom, or there is no game. "A game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles"⁷, writes Bernard Suits (1978: 41). Roger Caillois, writing in 1958, notes the "gratuitous difficulty" that is innate in *ludus* (2001: 27). Most games (all, by some definitions) have a goal that the player must aim for. Restrictions on permitted behaviour delay the player's achieving the goal, as do puzzles and difficulties and sometimes chance. The sole purpose of these restrictions is that they create the game. Solitaire without restrictions on where cards may be placed is no longer a game: it is merely sorting out cards. In computer games that are set in a world, rather than being pure puzzle games like Solitaire or *Tetris*, the world will have limits and there will be objects that the player can imagine that don't exist in the gameworld. Even in Solitaire the textual basis of the game is limited: there are no Princesses or elevens in the deck. Rules are restrictions on the player's freedom.

At the same time, games tend to proclaim the player's autonomy and freedom. Computer games, especially, emphasise the player's agency, and as simulation becomes a growing basis in all computer games, rules are downplayed. Of course rules don't disappear, but they become less explicit. In a simulation like *The Sims* there are plenty of rules determining what can be done and what effects any player action can have, but

⁷ Suits's book is devoted to discussing the definition of games, and many objections to this definition are debated. The full definition, from which the "portable" definition above is taken, is as follows:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Buffalo Press, 1978) 41.

most of these rules are never spelled out as they are in a game of *Monopoly* (see also Johnson-Eilola 1998)

All the bin Laden games at Newgrounds have the same goal: harm and ultimately kill bin Laden. The goal is extremely easy to attain: there are hardly any hindrances at all here. The interface is simple, the tasks are simple, and it is almost impossible *not* to attain the goal within a few minutes.

In these games the usual relationship between goal and hindrances is inverted. Whereas the goal in *Ludo* is rather arbitrary, and mostly a pretext for engaging with the strategy and luck involved in the hindrances, the goal in the Bin Laden games is their whole point. These political web games emphasise the goal above the hindrances.

Bad Dudes vs. Bin Laden

Bad Dudes vs. Bin Laden is a typical game from the Newgrounds collection of bin Laden games. The instructions on the entry describe an extremely simple interface: simply click your mouse where you want to punch bin Laden:

We have Osama bin Laden in custody.
Are you a bad enough dude to kick his ass?
Instructions: Simply click your mouse where you want to punch bin Laden. Click anywhere to start. (Fulp 2001)

The game has a rudimentary scoring system where the player's remaining life is compared to bin Laden's remaining life. Bin Laden does hit back, but will only really harm the player if the player does nothing. The game encourages harsh means, and a mouse click on bin Laden's torso translates to a fictional punch in the balls (see the middle image in Figure 12).



Figure 12: Screenshots from *Bad Dudes vs. Bin Laden*. The text in the first image reads “We’ve got no problem with our Arab buddies... except for one.” The third image shows the final scene where the “Dude” kicks off bin Laden’s head.

The player controls an avatar in this game, whereas the other games I discuss leave the player outside of the represented space, controlling abstract crosshatches or, in *Bin Laden Liquors*, controlling a disembodied hand holding a pistol. The “dude” the player controls in *Bad Dudes* is a heavily muscled body-builder with fighting gloves. In the screen that immediately follows the instructions (the first image in Figure 12) there are two dudes, though only one is involved in the fights. They are as alike as clones, and display their muscles in careful poses, with tight-fitting singlets emphasising their pectorals. In the background we see the skyline of New York, without the twin towers of the World Trade Center. The fighting, on the other hand, appears to take place in an Arabic bazaar, unpopulated, but filled with banners and stalls. The winning sequence is abstracted from time and place altogether, and as the Dude kicks bin Laden’s head right off, the background explodes into a red blast of blood and victory. The lack of realism in the backgrounds and setting corresponds to the lack of realism in bin Laden’s decapitation and in the ease of killing him. These elements are not realistic, they are symbolic.

The difficulty level is so low that acquiring greater skill becomes uninteresting. The interface is undemanding: “simply click your mouse”. The simplicity of the interface parallels the un-nuanced political statements made in the games. This is also their

strength. These games are popular because they're quick to play and easy to understand: they have an extremely clear message.

In their very simplicity, these games epitomise the essence of the fighting game genre: kill or be killed, shoot or be shot at. Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that shooting may be particularly suited to computer games because the medium encourages us to want to act often and for our actions to be responded to:

The predominance of violence in computer games has been widely attributed to cultural factors, but I think that it can be partly explained by a desire for immediate response. Moreover, of all human actions, none is better simulated by clicking on a control device, than pulling a trigger. I am not trying to defend the violence of computer games but it seems to me that the theme of shooting exploits with frightful efficiency the reactive nature of the medium. (Ryan 2001a)

The lack of challenge in the game demonstrates that *ludus* is not an important element in the game either. The goal of killing bin Laden is easily achieved and the challenge of getting to the ending is not the point of the game. This is a game as *ritual*. Playing *Bad Dudes* is a fictional wish-fulfilment.

Mission 01: Kill Bin Laden

Mission 01: Kill Bin Laden (Sapient 2001), another Newgrounds game, is an even more extreme example of this ritual game where the goal takes precedence over the challenges of the journey: it is quite impossible to lose this game.

The game begins with the display of an animated image of Bin Laden's face. The face blinks and says in a fake Arabic accent: "There is no god but Allah". The title of the game appears letter by letter as though it is teletyped to the screen: "Mission objective: Kill Bin Laden". There are three separate scenes within the game. First, there is target practice. A minaret fills the screen and in front of its many arches targets pop up with bin Laden's face on them. The target stays still until the player has manoeuvred the mouse cursor (represented as the cross-hatch in a gun) onto it and clicked to shoot it down. If the player shoots elsewhere or does nothing, the target stays where it is and

nothing happens. Once the user has shot down a number of targets, the mission begins: “Shoot to kill”. Bin Laden himself (represented as a small man in white robes) begins to dart in and out of the archways in the minaret. He moves fast, and it is surprisingly difficult to hit him. Surprising, that is, unless you move your mouse very, very slowly. Then you will notice that the tiny bin Laden figure remains perfectly still in an archway until the mouse cursor approaches it. Then, just before the mouse is on top of the figure, it slips away. It is quite impossible to shoot it.

After the user has shot and missed bin Laden several times, a close-up of bin Laden’s face replaces the minaret. He smiles and speaks: "My friend, don't shoot. Let us negotiate". As soon as he has spoken these words, the crosshatch reappears, but larger this time, so that we can only see what is visible in the target of the imaginary gun. The player is free to move the gun around the screen, but the only way to continue is to click the mouse – and clicking the mouse, of course, means to fire the gun and blast off a section of bin Laden’s head. It takes four or five shots to reduce him to a headless neck, and the details shown are both gory and strikingly unrealistic (Figure 13).

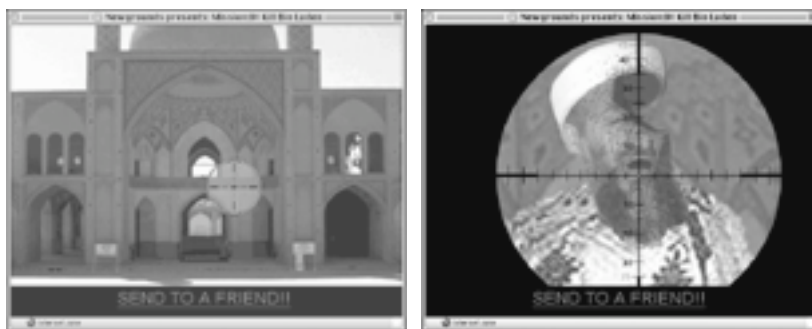


Figure 13: Two scenes from Mission 01: Kill Bin Laden. In the first, bin Laden darts in and out of archways, always avoiding the player’s aim. In the second, he has asked to negotiate but the only option available to the player at this point is to shoot him.

Like *Online Caroline*, this is a work that pretends to be influenced by user choices, but that in fact is completely scripted. It promises agency but offers none. It lacks even the personalisations of *Online Caroline*. Players may not be aware of the lack of possibility

if they only play the game once and try to shoot fast without scrutinising the behaviour of their target.

As a political statement, the game appears to have been created with the intention of getting back at bin Laden, but its interaction design implies a different ethics. Why is the game designed so that it is impossible to shoot bin Laden using “fair” means? Perhaps the idea of the Al Qaida hiding in the desert and behind columns fits the presentation of the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon as “cowardly”. The game implies that the way to get even with bin Laden is by trickery. The ending, where you kill bin Laden though he wishes to negotiate, is distinctly unheroical.

New skins for old games

These individually produced games are remakes of older, arcade games. A familiar game is given a new “skin”, much as new versions of Chess are sold with characters from StarWars instead of bishops and pawns. In most cases the rules remain the same while the skin, or the semiotic level, is altered. Espen Aarseth’s distinction between three layers in games makes this easier to discuss. The three layers are:

- Gameplay (the players’ actions, strategies and motives)
- Game-structure (the rules of the game, including the simulation rules)
- Game-world (fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc.) (Aarseth 2003a)

The gameplay is the player activity resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld. Gameplay is what happens when one or more individuals play a game. It is what happens when the player engages with the rules, and the experience of playing.

The game-structure, or rules define what can be done and what the goals of the game are. The rules of chess define that your goal is to capture the opponent’s king, that you capture a piece by landing on it with one of your own pieces, and they specify how each piece may be moved.

The third layer of the game is the gameworld or topology. This includes the fictional world if the game has one. Not all games afford fictional worlds, though. It is of

little use to talk about *Tetris* or Poker as having a fictional world, though *Tetris* has a topology of sorts; there is a sense of space on the screen) The gameworld includes the textual and sometimes also material aspect of the game: how it looks, sounds and feels. The images on a computer screen, the shape, feel and look of a deck of cards, the joystick or the dice and the graphics on a monopoly board are all elements that belong to the semiotic system of their games.

In many games, the topology, look and textures may change without players experiencing the game as a different game. Chess is still recognisably Chess whether it is played with rocks in the mud or pieces that look like the Simpson family. On the other hand, if you keep the gameworld but change the rules, players tend to experience the new set of rules as defining a new game. Bridge and Go Fish are clearly different games, though both can be played with the same deck of cards.

Likewise, many popular computer games allow players to design their own “skins” to game characters and objects. When I play *The Sims* I can download or make my own extra furniture and faces, thus changing the semiotic aspect of the game. The game remains the same, but the mere fact that players often invest a lot of time in customising their games suggests that the semiotic level does have great significance for our experience of the game. Perhaps the very fact that we can affect this level, and adjust it to current events, is crucial. For instance, after September 11, skins of Bin Laden were almost instantly developed and downloaded *en masse* for popular games such as *The Sims* and *Quake* (Cyberextruder.com 2001). In Norway, the marriage of Princess Märtha Louise was accompanied by a set of royal sims developed by net artists. The set included not only the royal family, but “hangers on” and ex-girlfriends, familiar from the tabloids (Eidsmo et al. 2002).

Some political web games do pretty much put a new skin on an old game: they take an old set of rules, but change the semiotic system. *New York Defender* (Stef & Phil

2001) is conceptually very similar to *Missile Command*. *Gulf War 2* (2003) is like a caricature of *Civilization* (1991). *Kabul Kaboom!* (Frasca 2001b) has a lot in common with *Space Invaders* (*Space Invaders*, 1978), and *Rumsfeld Invaders* (*Rumsfeld Invaders*, 2001) is a very specific remake of *Space Invaders*. *Al Quaidamon* (Fulp 2002) and *Osamagotchi* (Drugfilms 2003) are take offs of Tamagotchi games, and *Bin Laden Liquors* (Fieler 2000) is like dozens of arcade games of cowboys shooting in bars. Caricature and irony is of course often the main point of these games: making the royal family into Sims is as much social commentary as it is art. Sometimes the game referred to carries a lot of meaning.

The semiotic level is thus the most original level in these games, and in many it carries far more meaning than the simple, copied rules and gameplay.

Political web games don't simply take the rules and basic concept from older games, they also sample images and sounds from other media. Bin Laden's photograph is used many times over in the kill Bin Laden games. Gonzalo Frasca's *Kabul Kaboom!*, on the other hand, appropriates details from Picasso's *Guernica*, and places them on top of the pixellated image of dark green night sky that became so familiar on CNN and other news sites and television channels during the bombing of Afghanistan.

Political web games combine elements from two usually separated spheres of meaning: rules from a familiar game with images and sounds from a familiar current event, and sometimes, as in *Kabul Kaboom!*, from other art. The effect of the games is in the clash between these two domains. Metaphors work the same way, as do jokes and political cartoons.

New York Defender

While the political web games at Newgrounds in the weeks following September 11 were almost all ritual slayings of Bin Laden, other themes were explored in games published

elsewhere. *New York Defender* is a French game that aroused disgust and delight in discussion forums like Metafilter.com. The game shows a simplified image of the New York skyline and gives the player the task of shooting down the planes that keep flying straight towards the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Though the first planes are easy to shoot down, more and more planes come towards the towers at ever increasing speed, and it is impossible to keep them at bay forever. Once two or more planes hit a tower, it will collapse. When both towers are collapsed, the game is over.

Some writers at Metafilter found the idea of a game about such a horrific event disturbing and even unethical. Others found the game to be hilarious. Games are often seen as frivolous, and the very idea of making a game about an event that shocked society as these attacks did appalled many people.



Figure 14: In New York Defender the player has to shoot down the aeroplanes before they hit the towers. More and more aeroplanes appear, so though you can postpone the catastrophe you cannot avoid it.

The instructions given for playing *New York Defender* are simple:

"Utilisez votre souris pour combattre le sentiment d'impuissance". "Use your mouse to combat the feeling of powerlessness", would be the English translation, though the game is resolutely French and offers no translation. The line is scarcely necessary in any case, because the game's interface is so familiar: a crosshatch always means a weapon, and if the mouse will control the weapon, then clicking the mouse is to fire. Interpreted

as practical instructions, the single line (there are no other guidelines) is reminiscent of the instructions for *Bad Dudes*: “Simply click your mouse where you want to punch bin Laden.” Yet the sentence says much more than this. “Use your mouse to combat the feeling of powerlessness” is a statement that extends beyond the fictional world of the game and into the actual world where the player has watched this scene on television again and again.

Although the game may offer a feeling of control for a short while, allowing the player to gun down the planes and protect the city, the control doesn’t last for long. As the planes come faster and faster, it becomes more and more difficult to defend New York. While the only possible outcome of *Bad Dudes* and *Mission 01* is that bin Laden be killed, the only possible outcome of *New York Defender* is that the towers collapse. The player is powerless to win. Using the mouse will only delay the feeling of powerlessness. But that is all that is promised by the game, anyway: “Use the mouse to *combat* the feeling of powerlessness”. To fight does not mean to win, and perhaps this brings *New York Defender* closer to the traditional balance of a game than the Newgrounds games. Powerlessness is held at bay so long as there are hindrances to fight. Because this game cannot be absolutely won, it can be played for ever, or at least again and again. The current high score is 545088 points, which would require deferring powerlessness for quite a long stretch of time.

And yet the game does come to an end, and this end can be interpreted as a declaration that fighting terrorism in this manner can’t work. One of the first commentators of the game on Metafilter.com drew this conclusion, and saw *New York Defender* as a clear descendent of the arcade game *Missile Command* (1980). In *Missile Command* the player is defending California against nuclear attack. The attacks are ceaseless and like in *New York Defender*, their speed increases as the player destroys

them. The game ends when the player is out of ammunition, upon which the final scene is played out: an Armageddon of explosions across the screen.

Bin Laden Liquors

Bin Laden Liquors (Fieler 2000) is another of the most popular games of the weeks immediately after September 11.



Figure 15: Bin Laden Liquors, in major carnage mode. The carnage is in fact quite mild, and is simply indicated by the splashes of red blood against the cigarette shelves. Dead bin Ladens simply disappear.

Like *New York Defender*, *Bin Laden Liquors* is a game that cannot be won, but while *New York Defender* has been met with scepticism and the suspicion that it casts doubt upon the possibility of fighting terrorism with violence, *Bin Laden Liquors* has been taken at face value as an opportunity to shoot bin Laden clones again and again and again.

Bin Laden Liquors is a simple shooting game. There is only one scene: a liquor store that is very reminiscent of bars in cowboy arcade games. A hand at the bottom of the screen holds a gun that the player can move horizontally using the mouse.

Terrorists, all wearing bin Laden's face, pop up from behind the counter, and almost as often, the naked torso of a hostage pops up. The aim of the game is to shoot as many bin

Ladens as possible, while not harming the hostages. The game is over when you've missed ten terrorists, but as long as you keep hitting terrorists, new ones will continue to reappear. There is no winning situation, only the promise of a better high score.

It is quite easy to shoot these bin Ladens, although a lapse of attention will tend to lead to a shot hostage (punished by a simple voiceover: "You wounded a hostage!") and perhaps an escaped bin Laden. This narrator also reads the introductory threat as the image of the liquor store is first displayed: "You're messing with the wrong people, bin Laden!". Bin Laden, who appears to be the proprietor of this liquor store, responds to this threat with an affronted "Get out of my store!", in a fake Arabic accent. As more and more of the bin Laden clones are shot, they (he?) utter various other expletives at random, starting quite early with "I piss on you!" and repetitions of "Get out of my store!" and only advancing to "I kill you!" and "Death to all Americans!" after the first nine or ten clones have been shot. The tempo of the pop-up terrorists remains steady throughout, and does not increase as do the attacking aeroplanes in *New York Defender*.

The player, represented by the bodiless hand holding the gun, is given no voice during the game. The player is however given a beer: after a few minutes, the left hand appears in the frame, holding a glass of beer, which is held up as though the player has a drink of it. Then the hand disappears from the screen again, to return a few minutes later for another sip. The beer confirms the strangely detached role the player is given in this game, and the disconnection between player-role and the inhabitants of the liquor store.

In the political setting of this game, though, the beer drinking resonates strongly with the armchair entertainment most Westerners expect wars to be after the media shows of the 1990 Gulf War. *New York Defender* has none of this reflexivity. There is the indirect reference to the media in having chosen to make a game out of precisely the

scene that replayed again and again on our television screens. But the player is invisible apart from the abstract crosshatch that targets the aeroplanes, and there is no acknowledgement of any discontinuity between actual player and the fictional defender of New York. The ontological fusion is given fertile ground here.

On the surface, it may seem that *New York Defender* was seen as disrespectful and ghoulish because it replays the awful images that had already given so many TV-watchers nightmares. Making a game of images of death may be more disturbing than the simple replaying of them on television stations around the world (Frasca 2001c). What may be more upsetting is that the game pretends to give the player a chance of averting the disaster, but as the speed and number of planes increases, it becomes clear that that promise was fraudulent.

Bin Laden Liquors promises revenge and aggression rather than useless defence that will always be too late. Just like *Mission 01: Kill Bin Laden* and the many other games of this ilk, *Bin Laden Liquors* allows angry and frightened Westerners to ritually slaughter the designated scapegoat. But where the other games make the slaying final, *Bin Laden Liquors* generates endless new bin Ladens. It would be easy to see this as an argument for the impossibility of fighting terrorism with guns, but this doesn't seem to be the intention, or the way in which most gamers have interpreted it. Instead the endlessness and the beer drinking can be seen as an ironic comment on the gaming situation itself. The very idea of a store called Bin Laden Liquors is rather absurd in the first place, as is the model aeroplane hanging from the ceiling and the Camel cigarette ads. When a bullet hits one of the bin Ladens the effect is anything but gory or realistic: the bin Laden emits a surprised "Oy!" and is obscured behind the cartridge that has been ejected from the gun. The hostage is equally absurd: a muscled man with bored-looking eyes in narrow-rimmed glasses, a conventional haircut and a hastily photoshopped gag around his mouth.

The game has two modes: minimal carnage and major carnage. The only difference between them is that major carnage results in rather un-bloodlike splashes of translucent red appear on the cigarettes behind the counter each time someone is killed. Death is clean in this game, and the dead are instantly reborn to mock the player, as Emmanuelle Jardonnet noted in *Le Monde* (2001). Even when the game is lost, nothing suggests that the bin Ladens and hostages in the liquor store cease their strange dances, all that happens is that the player is expelled from this world and awarded points for his or her actions. Losing *New York Defender* is a very different experience: the world collapses and the player is left helplessly to watch.

Bin Laden Liquor thus relies heavily on humour and the detachment of irony, while *New York Defender* is perfectly serious. Of course *New York Defender* can be seen as implicitly ironic in its very portrayal of such a scene, but if so, it is a poker-faced irony that is not marked on the semiotic level as in *Bin Laden Liquors*. Ridiculing bin Laden was, of course, extremely common once he had been named as the orchestrator of the terrorist attacks. Jokes about the attacks themselves also proliferated, but these had a forbidden taint to them, and were never presented as being quite acceptable as was the ridicule of bin Laden. Perhaps there is a similarity between jokes and games, especially these brief games, that we have yet to discover?

Kabul Kaboom!

The irony in *Kabul Kaboom!* is of a very different kind: it is deliberate and critical. The images set the scene immediately. The player controls a mother, mouth up in a wail or a hungry mouth. She is carrying her infant child with desperation speaking through her whole body. The image is taken from Picasso's massive anti-war painting, *Guernica*. The background is from a very different source: it is a poor quality videophone image of a night sky over Kabul, alight with bombs. This image and others very similar to it held

the place of pride on CNN's website and in their broadcasts in the early days of the bombings of Afghanistan.



Figure 16: *Kabul Kaboom*, by Gonzalo Frasca.

The “point” of *Kabul Kaboom*, *New York Defender* and *Gulf War 2* is that you cannot win. To understand the message of the game, you have to play it until you see that this rule exists. These are mini-games, so it doesn't take more than a few minutes to discover this. Once discovered, the game can be replayed but this is just repetition. There are no new challenges.

Games such as these make a double move. First they claim that a current situation is a game. Then they say that this game cannot be won.

Games and simulations

While the initial Bin Laden games are based on shooters and arcade games, there are other political web games that are based on strategy games like *Civilization* and *The Sims* instead. These games are more argumentative: rather than simply allow the ritual slaying of a hated enemy, they simulate a situation to demonstrate their interpretation of something that is planned or is happening. The final section of this chapter is about three of these games: *Gulf War 2*, *Ashcroft Online* and *Alquidamon*.

It could be argued that these, along with the more limited Bin Laden games such as *Mission 01: Kill Bin Laden*, are false games, or more correctly, works of representational art that use the rhetoric of games but are not themselves games. As Suits writes,

Ring around the Rosie and the like are not games, for they are what I should call *scripted* undertakings; that is, activities whose execution is prescribed beforehand, as in a theatrical performance or ceremonial ritual. (Suits 1978: 92)

Many of the Bin Laden games are precisely such scripted undertakings, and their repetitive slaying of the declared nemesis of Western civilisation is very close to ritual. Games where loss can only be postponed but never avoided, or games that cannot be lost but only won, lack the challenge of attaining a goal that most games depend on.

Though I use the word game to refer to the political web games, I see that some of them are bad games while others are scripted: they refer to games but are not themselves quite games. Most of them promise to be games, but turn out to be so restricted that they are either bad games or simply animations with added interactivity. Yet they are generally referred to as games in their respective communities.

The term “game” can be defined quite broadly, as Roger Caillois does. His 1958 definition of games includes make-believe, sports, puzzles, gambling and physical pleasures like roller-coasters. However, he distinguishes between various kinds of game. He outlines a continuum from *paidia*, the free, chaotic, improvised play of children, to *ludus*, which is the disciplined, rule-bound form of play that often involves particular skills, puzzles and overcoming “gratuitous difficulty” (Caillois 2001: 27). In addition, he lists four elements that are varyingly present in games: *agon* (conflict), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (make-believe and imitation) and *ilinx* (vertigo and other physical pleasures, such as dizziness). (Caillois 2001: 27).

The Bin Laden games are centred on *agon*, and thus naturally draw upon arcade games from the seventies and eighties, a time when *agon* was primary in most

videogames. This is of course also because arcade games are simple visually and conceptually, and games programmed by individuals at the spur of the moment must be simple. The works that simulate situations rather than enact a contest the user must try to win (*Ashcroft Online*, *Al Quaidamon* and *Gulf War 2*) are more dominated by mimicry and representation.

What is striking about political web games is that alea, or chance, is almost completely absent from them. Though most of them are not absolutely scripted, most of them have only one possible outcome. Even a game like *Al Quaidamon*, which allows two opposite player strategies, has only one ending, as I will discuss below. This may be due to their extremely limited size (remember, they are written quickly and most can be played in less than five minutes), or it may be due to their role as political statements or arguments.

Gulf War 2

Gulf War 2 presents itself as a game, but is totally scripted. The player is kept active accepting settings that cannot be changed, watching the results of imagined choices and clicking “Continue” buttons in regular infoboxes. *Gulf War 2* refers very deliberately to the strategy game *Civilization*, using a similar map view, small icons that represent troops and cities, and popup windows for advisors to suggest strategic moves. This simplified version of *Civilization* has been given a fresh skin: the map is of the Middle East and the advisors are American politicians.

The rhetorical insistence of its gameness is played out not only visually in the map, tokens and advisors, but in words and in the rhythm of the interaction as well, though not in the meaningfulness of the interaction. The style of writing refers not to *Civilization* but to war and strategy games, often those in which the player is a lone hero: “Do you accept this mission?” The starting sequence where the player is shown the

different kinds of soldiers and weapons is also a classic rendering of the pre-mission equipment check. In the games *Gulf War 2* copies, the player can usually choose which kinds of equipment she wishes to use. In this game, however, there is no choice. The repeated situations where we expect choice can be seen as belonging to a rhetoric of interactivity. Choices are continually offered but then negated. The advisors do not allow alternatives, as in genuine simulation games, instead there is only one available button, labelled "Continue". The player cannot choose weapons or soldiers. And yet the player is constantly addressed as though she has agency and choice.

Choosing a broader definition of game, as Caillois does, *Gulf War 2* is clearly a game. It is however masquerading as a particular *kind* of game. It mimics wargames and strategy games, games in which *agon* and *alea* are important. In *Gulf War 2*, *agon* is always at the forefront, the game is completely centred on the conflict between the US and Iraq and then other Arab nations. However there is a mismatch between the assumption of a game in which the player has control and the forced passivity that actually ensues. Of course this mismatch transfers easily to the actual war, the role of the lone protagonist that America appears to be choosing, in contrast to the predetermined outcome the game's developer believes and claims that a second Gulf war will have.

The player has nothing to do other than inspect the troops (and press "Continue" when she realises she has no choices and nothing more will happen) and watch the action play out, with regular interruptions from advisors who report on the situation, and sometimes squabble among themselves, but never allow the player to respond with anything other than a meek "Continue". So here there is *agon*, but it has slipped from being between the player and another contestant or a difficult puzzle or object, to being an *agon* which the player is forced to watch, complicit but not in command.

Gulf War 2 contains many references to wargames, strategy games and simulation games, which all have a strong element of alea, or chance, which affects the outcome of the game along with the strategy and dexterity skills of the player. By relying on genre conventions *Gulf War 2* appears to promise that there is an element of chance and uncertainty in the game. *Gulf War 2* thus relies on the players expectation of alea for its effect.

Gulf War 2 has such a heavy dosing of irony that the player's make-believe is likely to be quite distanced, rather than being a major part of the gameplay. The game clearly mimic other games, and thus sets up a double role for the player. The player can imagine herself playing a simulation game of the invasion of Iraq, and she can also imagine herself truly in control – or rather, not in control – of the US forces.

Winning or losing

Simplicity moves towards two ends in these games. Either it's easy to win or it's impossible to win. It only takes a few minutes to "kick Bin Laden's ass" and watch his head spin off. (Is it possible to be killed by Bin Laden in this game?) In *Bin Laden's Liquors*, on the other hand, the stream of terrorists is endless and you can never shoot them all. The game doesn't end when you win or lose, it ends when your time is up. *New York Defender* and *Kabul Kaboom!* are equally unwinnable, and that's part of the point of the games. The unwinnable or neverending game is a classic genre in videogames.

Steven Poole describes *Space Invaders* similarly:

Space Invaders was (..) the first "endless" game. Previously, videogames had stopped when a certain score was reached, or restarted; Taito's classic, on the other hand, just kept getting harder and harder, the aliens becoming a terrifying blur as they whipped across the screen raining bombs and hurtled ever closer to ground zero. Therein lies the game's special tension: it is unwinnable. The player's task is to fight a heroically doomed rearguard action, to stave off defeat for as long as possible, but the war can never be won. Earth *will* be invaded. (Poole 2000: 37)

Winning or losing is not the main point of these games, nor is developing skill or chance. The outcome of the game is to all practical extents predetermined. Strictly

speaking it may be more correct to call them simulations rather than games, as Gonzalo Frasca suggests, writing about his game *Kabul Kaboom!*

Technically, I would rather refer to it as a simulation that draws on certain videogame conventions. However, from the start, my goal was to do some kind of absurd game, with no score, ways of winning or losing. Still, I did not want it to be an addictive game, like it happens in "*New York Defender*" which has good gameplay - I think that players should not enjoy a game about terrorism. In other words, replayability kills the political message because it makes it invisible and all you can see is the gameplay. (email correspondence, 12/10/2001)

The *point* of each game is not quite the conclusion – you die or Bin Laden dies – but rather the underlying rules. In most of the games, there is no doubt that we will win. In a counter-games like *Kabul Kaboom!* there is no victory, only more slaughter. In *New York Defender* defence is impossible.

Most computer games are painstakingly unpolitical. They're set in neutral territory and the plot is abstract enough not to have any real life consequences. Wars are generic, not specific. If a real war is referred to in a game, it'll usually be an old one that gamers are too young to remember. For example, *Wolfenstein* is about the Second World War.

In addition to the few overtly political games (like Chris Crawford's *Balance of the Planet* from 1990) prior to the web games discussed here, a lot of games can be interpreted politically. *Civilization* and *Sim City* and *The Sims* are all biased in various ways (towards consumerism or public transport or armed conflict, for instance). This kind of insidious politicisation may have a lot of influence on players in various ways.

Political opinions and emotions have traditionally been expressed in all sorts of art - but they're almost absent in computer games - a sort of parallel to our doubt that computer games might be art. Gonzalo Frasca, who is also the author of *Kabul Kaboom*, argues that games can and should be political. However, he suggests that the replayability of games is in conflict with the possibility of a political game. One solution to this conundrum is to develop games that can only be played once, so that choices are

binding and thereby more ethically meaningful. Games that can be saved and reloaded at any point encourage a playing style where players try out every option. I may make ethical choices the first time I play, but I'm very likely to go back and see what would have happened if I'd made another choice. In *Bin Laden Liquors*, for instance, the goal is ostensibly to kill the terrorists and not the hostages. Your score worsens with each hostage you kill, and yet, built into the game, is the possibility of killing hostages.

A lot of computer games treat the bad choices much the same way as the old pattern we know from fairy tales. Many fairy tales are built around this pattern: the protagonist is given something precious, but an item or a part of the valued object or situation is forbidden, usually for no clear reason. The protagonist promises to respect this prohibition, yet inevitably breaks his or her promise. Once the prohibition is broken, trouble arises, yet after some struggle, the situation is resolved happily for the hero. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Beauty marries the Beast, but must promise never to look at him at nighttime. In *Bluebeard* the princess must promise to never use the seventh key. This pattern is far older and deeper than fairy tales, it is the stuff of myths: Adam and Eve were given a beautiful garden, but must not eat the apple. Pandora's box must not be opened.

In *Bin Laden Liquors*, the prohibition is clear: do not shoot the hostages. Unlike the fairy tales, this prohibition is ethically meaningful, and corresponds to the laws and assumptions of every day life. It is similar to the fairy tales in that the very existence of such a prohibition promises that there is something behind it. From our cultural grounding in fairy tales and other examples of this pattern we know that if we do what is forbidden, we will experience something exciting and perhaps finally beneficial. Pragmatically we also know that the game developers will have coded some reaction to killing a hostage, and much as a child will click on every object in a child's computer game to see if something interesting pops up behind it, we're interested to see what

would happen.

Bin Laden Liquors is a simple game, so not much does happen when a hostage is killed. Also it is quite hard to avoid hitting a hostage now and then, so killing a hostage needn't be a matter of choice. In this sense *Bin Laden Liquors* isn't the best example of this pattern of prohibition in games. Consider though, the end of a game. If you win the game by achieving the correct goal, you are still likely to want to know what would have happened in one of the other possible ends.

This testing out of possible consequences, combined with the adventure game genre with its relatively linear plotline, does not encourage an ethical engagement with the characters in the game, Frasca argues. He believes that serious, ethical videogames must be irreversible, so that user's are forced to treat their fictional actions seriously (Frasca 2001a). The ability to play with various outcomes can lead to distance rather than engagement and caring. Simulations, on the other hand, rely on this kind of testing out of possibilities, and the message, if any, of a simulation can only be discovered precisely by breaking the apparent prohibitions and seeing how the system will react. *Ashcroft Online* is an example of a political simulation of this kind.

Ashcroft Online and Al Quaidamon

The raw conflict of us against them dominated the first wave of games that came out of the War on Terrorism. As Bin Laden remained elusive and initial anger and desire to hit back reduced, other aspects of the war on terrorism were dealt with in online games. Fights and simple anger are easily dealt with in classic arcade games. New games deal with themes like the treatment of prisoners suspected of being in allegiance with Al Qaida, the increased surveillance of the American population and the consequences of a war on Iraq. These themes have been presented as simulations and, in the case of the possible war, the genre of strategy games rather than fighting games.

Ashcroft Online 1.0 (O'Connor and O'Connor 2002) is named for the Attorney General of the United States, who has permitted heavily increased surveillance after the attacks of September 11. The work simulates web browsing in a perhaps not so distant future where civilians are under constant surveillance. Playing upon the way America Online (AOL) presents its millions of users with a simplified and controlled version of the web, *Ashcroft Online* is an internet browsing system where anything the user reads or visits affects his or her “Patriot Rating”.

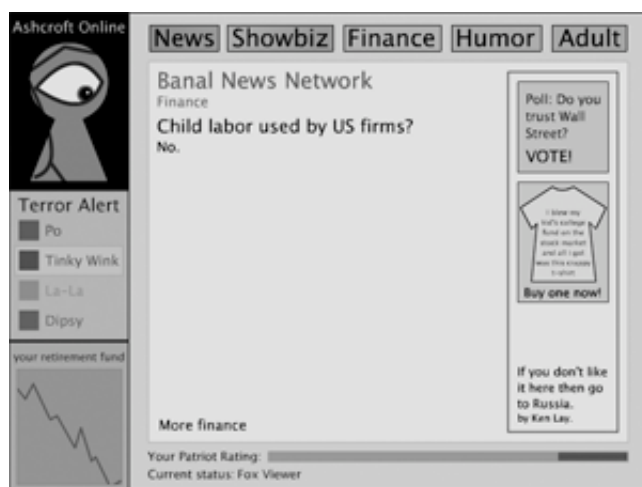


Figure 17: *Ashcroft Online 1.0*. This screenshot shows one of the news articles you can view from within the very closed network.

If you click the link to the poll (“Do you trust Wall Street”), for instance, a popup window declares “Yes!” and reports that 100% of the votes are positive – without ever actually allowing us to vote. Though some of the titles listed in the News section suggest the possibility of dissent, such as the article on “Child labor used by US firms?”, the content of the article is clear: “No” (see Figure 17). There are other sections available: Showbiz, Finance, Humor and Adult. Choosing Adult immediately makes your computer wheeze “you perv”, and your Patriot Rating sinks drastically. Reading weblogs and other non-approved sites likewise lowers your Patriot Rating, as does trying to read any news story that is critical of the government or status quo. If your Patriot Rating reaches zero, a message appears on your screen:

Attention citizen! Your surfing habits indicate that you have subversive tendencies. Stay where you are; officials from the Department of Re-Education will arrive at your home to relocate you to your new home.

Alright, this was just a simulation of things to come. Do you want to keep surfing?

Al Quaidamon is very similar in its strategy, though its politics are at the opposite end of the scale. Just as in *Ashcroft Online* there is a bar that rates your conduct according to your actions. However, here the simulated situation is that of keeping a prisoner.

When the first suspects were arrested after the attacks on the World Trade Center, they were imprisoned in circumstances that were criticised for being in breach of international conventions about the treatment of prisoners.

In *Al Quaidamon*, the user's task is to look after a prisoner. The tools available are a hairbrush for grooming, a doughnut for feeding, and a boxing glove for hitting. If you feed and groom the prisoner, he looks happier and happier, his clothes improve and your rating increases. If you neglect him or beat him he becomes unhappy, he loses his clothes, and the rating sinks.



Figure 18: *Al Quaidamon*. The prisoner has been treated fairly well, as you can see by the scale on the right, stating that he's treated a little better than a middle class American family, and by his clothes.

The ratings scale implicitly argues that human rights activists demand better terms for prisoners than for middle class American families. From bottom to top, the scale reads: "Hitler's Approval, Prisoner in 'Nam, 3rd World Country, Lower Class American Family,

Geneva Convention Approval, American in Prison, Middle Class American Family, Upper Class American Family, Human Rights Activists' Approval.” (see Figure 18).

Both *Ashcroft Online* and *Al Quaidamon* are simple simulations that give unambiguous, immediate feedback to the user. The world of a simulation like this defines its own values. Both use irony to express their message.

An interesting effect of simulations is that users will try out all the options, even enacting the options that are in conflict with the simulations or the user's set of values. When I played *Al Quaidamon* I started by treating the prisoner well, but although I could fairly easily get the “Human Rights Activist Approval” stamp, I wanted to see what would happen if I beat the prisoner too. So I beat him ruthlessly, watching him whimper in pain, until I was close to having “Hitler's Approval”. At that point an extra tool appeared: a gun. I picked the gun up, pointed it at the prisoner, and shot him with a click of my mouse. That, of course, was a far more satisfying end to the game than simply having treated the prisoner well. Anyway, unless I quit the game as soon as I had achieved “Human Rights Activist Approval”, the prisoner rapidly became unhappy again. Unless the prisoner is constantly fed and groomed, the game tends towards death.

Dream Kitchen, which I discuss in chapter 2, is an artwork that uses a similar strategy, but in *Dream Kitchen* the user has no choice in the matter. There are no alternatives to cruelty in *Kitchen*, so I must either quit the game or torture small animals. *Kitchen* does not give its user immediate ratings as *Al Quaidamon* and *Ashcroft Online 1.0* do, but after the torturing is complete, it issues the user with a report card that specifies how the user scored in obedience, sensitivity, obsessiveness, cruelty and impatience. The user's actions are forced but condemned. In *Al Quaidamon* the user is not forced to do anything, and cruelty is not necessary, though it is rewarded by a new toy (the gun) and a dramatically satisfying ending.

Perhaps I would not have played *Al Quaidamon* at all if I hadn't been researching political web games. That would have been a way of refusing to become complicit in the ethics the game induces its users to enact. But having entered the game I feel compelled to act against my conscience.

Brevity

Perhaps the Bin Laden games are so virulent and so successful because they rely solely on this one main element of digital media: they are reactive. They respond to user input. They simulate a desire and allow the player to feel active in a situation that in reality forced most people in Western cultures into passivity and waiting.

Games always enact an implicit ideology. *SimCity*, for instance, is built upon assumptions about urban planning and taxes that are far from universal (Starr 1994). Yet overtly political games are rare. It is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, that political games appear to be a popular form, made by individuals and widely shared and discussed in sprawling communities of gamers. While political web games have a lot in common with political cartoons and satire, their distribution channels are very different. Some are uploaded to community sites like Newgrounds.com. Others are self-published as standalone works, or as part of a site belonging to an individual or small group of people, like Idleworm.com or Uzinagaz.com. They are never presented in online journals or other edited fora. People find these games either because they frequent the gaming sites, or through links posted to discussion forums, mailing lists, weblogs or sent to friends by email. The entry screen to *Bin Laden Liquors* encourages this kind of viral marketing with an ironic message: "Do your part to rid the world of terrorism. Email this page to all your friends, associates and fellow patriots!"

In his writing on political video games, Gonzalo Frasca has written of the possibility that video games could be used for social change and not just for entertainment:

Videogames are not a trivial medium sentenced to merely serve as entertainment, but (...) could also be a powerful representational form that encourages critical thinking, personal empowerment and social change. (Frasca 2001e)

The political web games I've discussed in this chapter are small, often imperfect, and they are unlikely to change the world. But there are quite a lot of them. There are formalised communities like Newgrounds that foster the growth of independent, small-scale game authorship, and there are channels of distribution for non-commercial games like these: mailing lists, web discussion forums and weblogs have all popularised the games.

Since the 60s, people have been making their own non-commercial computer games. In the eighties, youngsters wrote text adventure games and simple graphical games on Commodore 64s, and sometimes they'd upload them to bulletin board systems on their 1200 baud modems. Flash, the ubiquity of images that are easily reused, and the internet's expansion have added critical mass to those home brewed games.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 appear to have been the first political events to have caused such a stream of games specifically about a current situation. Since then, more political games have been created, as we have seen: about the treatment of prisoners, the planned war on Iraq among other issues. Perhaps a ball has started rolling?

Most of these games are very brief, and their messages are fairly simple. Is this because a game with an ulterior motive apart from pleasure and/or competition cannot be sustained?

I think perhaps the answer lies elsewhere. Think of one-frame political cartoons, and the difference in expression, popularity and force in relation to full-length narrative comic books. “Feature-length” commercial computer games are not narratives, but like narratives they rely on the passing of time and on a development of skills and experiences. These Flash games have none of that. They can be played in two or three minutes each. Most of them have a fairly clear message, and many of them play upon a simple twist of meaning, as do jokes or political cartoons.

Click here

Ultimately, the satisfaction found in these games lies in the simplicity of the interaction. Users simply have to “click here to kill bin Laden”. The user comment I cited earlier confirms this: “i like the part when u kick him in the nuts”, the user happily notes. The actual action of clicking the mouse effortlessly translates into the fictional action of attacking bin Laden. This is a clear example of ontological interaction.

Several of the games stress the control innate in such interaction. *Mission 01: Kill bin Laden* first makes it impossible to kill bin Laden, and then impossible *not* to kill him, scripting the user’s possible actions as strictly as *Dream Kitchen* does. *Ashcroft Online* and *Al Quaidamon* rate the user’s actions, and the actions that the work presents as morally justified are rewarded with more interesting feedback. *New York Defender* and *Kabul Kaboom!* present the user with situations where the user cannot possibly win.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has two main focal points. One is the ontological fusion that can occur between user and fictional work, and the ontological interaction that makes the fusion happen. The other examines works that emphasise the deixis between user and work rather than the content or story, and the issues of control that arise from the relationship between user and work.

The concept of ontological fusion is from Thomas Pavel's work on fictional worlds, and I have applied it fairly directly to interactive works. I have been particularly interested in cases where the *user* becomes the site of ontological fusion between the actual and the fictional world. The user's experience of being within the story or within the fictional world has been discussed by other researchers in terms of immersion (Douglas 1996; Murray 1997; Ryan 2001b).

I have added to this discussion by explaining how such an ontological fusion comes about, building my explanation on Walton's theory of depiction. When the users' actual actions are *also* fictional actions, Walton argues, the user positions herself as within the fictional world. However Walton only discusses non-digital works, and the actual user actions he discusses are only perceptual actions, such as looking or listening. I expanded this to include non-perceptual actions as well, such as clicking a mouse, moving one's feet on a dance mat connected to a gaming console or pulling the trigger of a plastic gun in a gaming arcade. This expansion of depiction goes beyond a depictive representation, but follows the same mechanisms. I called this ontological interaction.

The second focus of the thesis is on works where the relationship between user and work is emphasised and on the control and power inherent in this relationship. This was theoretically explored through Mieke Bal's concept of deictic narrative as well as in discussions of the second person address and the use of force that it implies.

Chapter 5 presented a structural, narratological approach to the user's position in relation to the work. Here I discuss the user's relationship to the text rather than to the fictional world. The user can thus be internal to the story or to the discourse of the work. This allows me to contextualise my terms in relation to other terms that are similar to ontological interaction, and to describe aspects of the works I discuss, but the narratological approach proves limiting because it is not capable of discussing what causes the user to feel part of the story. The approach provided through ontological interaction and fictionality has proved more useful. It is also this approach that can provide an understanding of the power innate in interaction, thus connecting the two main threads of the thesis.

Because ontological interaction equates actual and fictional actions, the user becomes responsible for fictional events, and this relates to the question of power. Chapters 6 and 7 analyse two kinds of works that have goals beyond entertainment or art: exploitative fictions and political web games. In these we see how ontological interaction and deictic control come together. In the exploitative fictions, the user is drawn into the fictional world through the deixis of a dialogue between the user and a fictional character. Such a dialogue is a type of ontological interaction. Once inside the fictional world, the user is trapped there – if the creators of the hoaxes, scams or marketing ploys have their way.

It is the simplicity of the interaction that makes the political web games so powerful. An actual click translates directly to fictionally killing bin Laden, and this is precisely what most of the players would like to do in the actual world, judging from the user reviews the games have received. Others of the political web games are more sophisticated, and coerce the user into acting according to the value judgements that are built into the game. These techniques are similar to those used in *Online Caroline* and *Dream Kitchen*, but in the web games they are used for explicit political purposes.

Interactive artistic and fictional works are new genres, and until the last few years, it has often seemed that there is more theory than art in the field. This is no longer the case. There is a large range of interactive art and narrative. Recent research also shows a far greater emphasis on analysis of specific works than was common during the 1990s. In this thesis I have aimed to participate in this movement by discussing many concrete examples of interactive art and narrative, as well as other interactive genres, and by using the works themselves to develop an understanding of interaction. In addition, I have attempted to develop and refine the methods we use for interpreting and describing interactive art and narrative.

There is still a lot to do. *Online Caroline*, *Dream Kitchen* and the bin Laden games are among the first of their kinds. As the genres develop, so will our understanding of how we interact with machines generating fictions.

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