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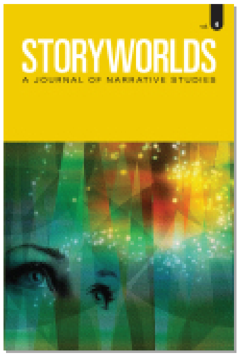

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Narration, Intrigue, and Reader Positioning in Electronic Narratives

Daniel Punday

This article grows out of the intuition that despite important recent contributions to the study of digital textuality, we still have very poor language for discussing the place of the reader in electronic—or computer-mediated—narratives.[1] Critics routinely observe that the reader seems more active in these stories, and as N. Katherine Hayles (2008) notes, early criticism was guilty of "extrapolating from the reader's ability to choose which link to follow to make extravagant claims about hypertext as a liberatory mode that would dramatically transform reading and writing" (31). Subsequent commentary has qualified those claims, but little work has been done to evaluate the relevance of core narratological concepts like *narrator*, *narratee*, and *implied reader* as tools to describe the process of reader positioning in electronic narratives.

A significant exception is Espen J. Aarseth's (1997) analysis of the text adventure game; here Aarseth coined the term *intrigue* to refer to "a sequence of oscillating activities effectuated (but certainly not controlled) by the user" (112). That is, intrigue describes those actions that a user must perform in order to move the game forward. Aarseth's use of this term is quite narrow: he sees it as a feature that is specific to the games he examines and that replaces the structure of narration central to traditional storytelling. In this essay I argue for the broader applicability of Aarseth's concept of intrigue. Specifically, I show that intrigue is a structure implicit in almost all electronic narratives and that it complements rather than replaces the narration *also* found in these texts. In other words, I argue that these stories have both narration and intrigue, both narrators and intrigants, narratees and intriguees. Expanding the scope of the concept of intrigue, I suggest, helps to explain the complex nature of our agency as readers in these narrative environments. I show the effectiveness of theorizing this dual structure for electronic narrative by turning to a series of case studies in the second half of my article, including hypertext narratives *afternoon* (Joyce 1987) and *Patchwork Girl* (Jackson 1995), the early text adventure game *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams and Meretzky 1984), and a narrativized electronic poem *Outrances* (Ichikawa, Crofts, and Dvorak 2009).

Reader Positioning in Print and Electronic Narratives

A fundamental part of our experience of narrative is extrapolating from the events, settings, and characters described directly to project both the larger story and the moral, philosophical, and social values that define the world in which that story takes place. As H. Porter Abbott (2008) puts it, "We are always called upon to be active participants in narrative, because receiving the story depends on how we in turn construct it from the discourse. Are stories, then, at the mercy of the reader and how diligently he or she reads? To a certain degree this is true. But most stories, if they succeed—that is, if they enjoy an audience or readership—do so because they have to some extent successfully controlled the process of story construction" (21–22). From the beginning of modern narratology, critics have recognized that this control means that readers intuit the values they are expected to hold. Wolfgang Iser (1978) describes our responsibilities as the "implied reader" this way: "He [the implied reader] embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself" (34). Discovering these predispositions and using them to interpret the meaning of the work involves a circular process that James Phelan (2005) calls a "feedback loop": "The author designs the textual phenomena for a hypothetical audience [. . .], and the individual rhetorical reader seeks to become part of that audience" (18, 19).

Several theoretical entities, which in turn imply "reception positions that interpreters of narrative must regularly—*and* simultaneously—occupy" (Herman 2002: 335), are widely accepted as part of current narratology. In *Story and Discourse* (1978) Seymour Chatman helped to codify narratology's understanding of the various entities involved in narration by distinguishing among the real author, the implied author, the narrator, the narratee, the implied reader, and the real reader (147). At the same time, Peter J. Rabinowitz's subtle distinction between the authorial and narrative audience achieved widespread acceptance and refined understandings of the idea of the implied reader. Rabinowitz (1987) explains:

> every author designs his or her work rhetorically for a specific hypothetical audience. But since a novel is generally an imitation of some nonfictional form (usually history, including biography and autobiography), the narrator of the novel (implicit or explicit) is generally an imitation of an author. He or she writes for an *imitation* audience (which I call the *narrative audience*) that also possesses particular knowledge. The narrator of *War and Peace* appears to be a historian. As such, he is writing for an audience that not only knows (as does the authorial audience) that Moscow was burning in 1812, but that also believes that Natasha, Pierre, and Andrei "really" existed, and that the events in their lives "really" took place. (94–95)

Phelan (1989) provides a nice example of the distinction between authorial and narrative audiences: in Browning's "My Last Duchess" the narrative audience ignores the rhymes and meter of the poem and treats the Duke as a realistic dramatic speaker, while the authorial audience is aware of the artificial elements of the poem's formal design

(5). Although there remains a lively debate about the scope and value of some of these distinctions, these entities have been broadly accepted as constituting discursive positions with which the reader can identify.[2]

Although there is no doubt that most electronic narratives have a narrator of some sort, that voice exists in a context of many other textual features that are usually absent in a print story. Consider the hyperlink. In *Avatars of Story* (2006), Marie-Laure Ryan reviews the hyperlink typologies of previous critics and synthesizes them into a six-part model. *Temporal* links jump us forward or backward in the story. *Simultaneity* links move us to another set of actions going on at the same time. *Perspective switching* links jump to a different focalization of the story. *Digressive* or background links give us information that explains what is going on in the present of the story. *Choose-your-own-adventure* links ask the reader to make a decision about how the characters should act in the story. Ryan refers to a sixth link type as *spatial*, by which she means not the jump to another literal place in the story, but instead the shift to another lexia linked through theme and imagery. Although these hyperlinks remind us of transitions in a print narrative, they often cannot clearly be associated with the narrator of an individual lexia. For example, in Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls* (2001), hyperlinks allow the reader to jump to other parts of the story that mention similar characters or topics. For instance, the "kissing2" lexia reads, "Vanessa had always roamed shopping malls alone; quarries. Secretly I harbored large fears in her adultless world, though not in my own sweet terrain where *I could run faster, confidently, could wrestle and hold* and there was no child who could beat me, not older, not younger, not even *my uncle*'s friends, boys in their teens who I would set upon like a feral child and they would hold back *because I was a child and because they were weak*." It is not clear that the narrator is aware of these links, and we may suspect that they are the work of some other agent who has constructed the text.

The reader's ability to become the "implied reader" of such narratives depends on recognizing not just the intentions of the narrators, then, but also how these links have been constructed—what Jeff Parker (2001) describes as a "linking schema" or "linkage." But the importance of grasping a text's underlying design applies to more than just hyperlinks. Ryan (2001) notes that the user of a computer program "needs a scenario that casts him in a role and projects his actions as the performance of concrete, familiar tasks" (217); she describes different scenarios that the reader might imagine (the text as theater, the text as a space, the text as a supermarket, the text as a kaleidoscope) and concludes, "which one of these scenarios will be preferred depends as much on the individual dispositions of the reader as on the nature of the text" (223). In focusing on the video game, Jesper Juul (2005) is more specific about how players grasp the design and rules of a game: "To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world" (1). When we play a video game, we have to understand the nature of the fictional world (the places, characters, and events that give the game world its shape and coherence), and yet at the same time we must grasp the rules by which we interact with the game itself. We intuitively understand that in some games our main activity is shooting things, while in others much of our progress is made by navigating spaces, gathering resources, or talking to characters.

For Juul, good game design means consistency between the rules of the game and the shape of the world:

> While the *design* of a game can work by choosing a domain or fictional setting and then subjectively designing rules to implement that domain, the player of a video game experiences this in an inverted way, where the representation and fictional world presented by the game cue the player into making assumptions about the rules of the game. In a computerized soccer game, the fictional world of the game will cue the player to assume that the game implements whatever concept the player has of soccer, including the normal soccer rules. (176)

Although these rules are obviously central to playing a video game, I believe that they apply more broadly to all forms of textuality that require the user to *act*, including hypertext narratives; after all, we must understand how a particular hypertext narrative *works* before we will know how to follow its links. The importance of the design of electronic narratives and the reader's need to grasp their rules make such narratives fundamentally different than traditional print stories. Of course, readers do need to follow rules to move through a printed book: if we didn't know that we were supposed to turn the pages to progress through the story, and that each page was supposed to be read according to its numerical order, we would be unable to grasp the meaning of the text. But print has fewer rules for use, and those rules are so broadly adopted that readers usually do not need to think about how they are to be implemented. Electronic texts, conversely, require us to grasp their rules for use on a case-by-case basis.

A central question, then, is where these rules fit within conventional narratological accounts of reader positioning. It might seem obvious that the analyst needs to treat these rules as simply another kind of knowledge that readers use in their role as the "authorial audience," but for his part Rabinowitz gives almost no attention to the reader's interaction with the physical artifact of the book. Does the authorial audience know the page number? Does it know what kind of paper it has been printed on, or the font that has been chosen? In general, critics have tended to emphasize higher-level issues related to the construction of the story viewed as a discursive rather than physical object. Thus, when Rabinowitz introduces the concept of the authorial audience, his focus is on readers' knowledge about history and genre. Although he assures us that "the potential range of assumptions an author can make . . . is infinite" (22), his examples are drawn from a fairly conventional understanding of background knowledge such as historical facts (the Kennedy assassination), cultural fads (a tabouleh and pita sandwich), specific books (*Hamlet*), and genre conventions (the least likely suspect usually turns out to be the murderer in a mystery) (21–22, 39). Likewise, Phelan's analysis of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, whose metafictional elements would seem to draw attention to the physical artifact of the book, focuses mostly on generic expectations: "This audience, which knows the conventions of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century narration, recognizes the twentieth-century novelist adopting the nineteenth-century conventions and wonders why" (1989: 86). Those elements of the work that Phelan associates with the authorial audience—genre, theme, convention—have to do with the unfolding of the story rather than the material properties of the book considered as an artifact in its own right. By contrast, consider the question asked before any of the short, flash narratives on Webyarns.com start: “Is Your Computer’s Sound On?” This question addresses the status of the electronic work as a technical artifact and not just the purveyor of a story, implying an awareness of the physical text that differs from the kinds of awareness or knowledge attributed to the authorial audience in most of Rabinowitz’s and Phelan’s examples.[3]

There is also a more subtle assumption that runs through Rabinowitz’s definition of the authorial audience that works against any attempt to take into account material properties of the physical book. In general, in becoming members of the authorial audience readers are embracing an idealized understanding of textual origin and relevant context. Initially this assertion might seem counterintuitive, since Rabinowitz contrasts the authorial audience and the narrative audience by stressing the authorial audience’s greater knowledge about the context of acts of narration—for example, those performed by character narrators. At the same time, however, the whole point of the authorial audience as a concept is to describe the interpretive moves that the author of a given work expects readers to make and to show how the author is able to control the story’s reception. In fact, Rabinowitz notes that entering the authorial audience for a narrative may involve pretending *not* to know something: “sometimes actual readers can respond to a text as authorial audience only by *not* knowing something that they in fact know—not knowing, as they read John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*, the actual (often unidealistic) course that the American labor movement would eventually follow; not knowing, as they read *U.S.A.*, that Dos Passos would later shift his political views” (33). Arguably, in the terms afforded by Rabinowitz’s model, the details of the physical book would normally fall into the category of things that the authorial audience is supposed not to know—or at least not to concern itself with. Authors, in Rabinowitz’s account, assume that readers will *not* focus on typefaces or page numbers, unless they are specifically cued to engage with these specifics of the material text.

In this sense, the notion of an authorial audience depends on a concept of authorship that is considerably narrower and culturally more specific than that of the source of a given text in all its material or physical specificity. We would do well to recall Foucault’s (1997) notion that "the name of an author is not precisely a proper name among others" (122). Instead, assigning a piece of writing to an author makes possible certain forms of discursive activity: "In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (124). Rabinowitz recognizes this dynamic when he notes the importance of ignoring certain modes of knowledge (or kinds of interests) when reading a narrative as a member of the authorial audience, but I want to recast the issue in slightly different terms. Specifically, reading as a member of the authorial audience, as Rabinowitz characterizes that reading position, means that one does not engage with questions about the material history and production of the physical book itself. Books like Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) or Steve Tomasula's *VAS* (2004), which explicitly foreground these sorts of questions through their play with typography and page layouts, appear to be exceptions to this rule. But in typographically playful works like these the narrative audience is made aware of these material elements of the text along with the authorial audience. Such works do not provide the book-material equivalent of the Duke's verse and rhyme—something unnoticed by the narrative audience but recognized by the authorial audience. This is because there is no convention that defines the relevance of material elements of the book in the way that the convention of verse defines the relevance of rhyme, meter, and sound.

The electronic work, then, depends on physical elements of the text that fall outside the scope of the knowledge that we usually attribute to the authorial audience. We might expand the concept of the authorial audience to include this knowledge, but doing so would mean ignoring the reading conventions that we bring with us from print. We will see that electronic narratives continue to depend on those conventions, and so I think that a better strategy is to posit a different kind of agent responsible for constructing electronic narratives and a different role for the reader to fulfill when following the rules of such texts. To explain what we gain by theorizing these new positions, let us take as an example an introductory lexia ("work in progress") from Michael Joyce's *afternoon* (1987):

> Closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends. Even

> so, there are likely to be more opportunities than you think there are at first. A word which doesn't yield the first time you read a section may take you elsewhere if you choose it when you encounter the section again; and sometimes what seems a loop, like memory, heads off again in another direction.
>
> There is no simple way to say this.

The voice in this passage appears to be less a narrator speaking to a narrative audience, as in other parts of the story, and something closer to Joyce himself addressing the authorial audience directly. The speaking agent refers explicitly to generic expectations about the story and knowledge of conventional reading practices—issues directly related to readers' ability to see themselves as (or rather become) members of the authorial audience, in Rabinowitz's and Phelan's terms. In this sense, the kind of knowledge needed to navigate *afternoon* seems to be included in what the authorial audience is supposed to know.

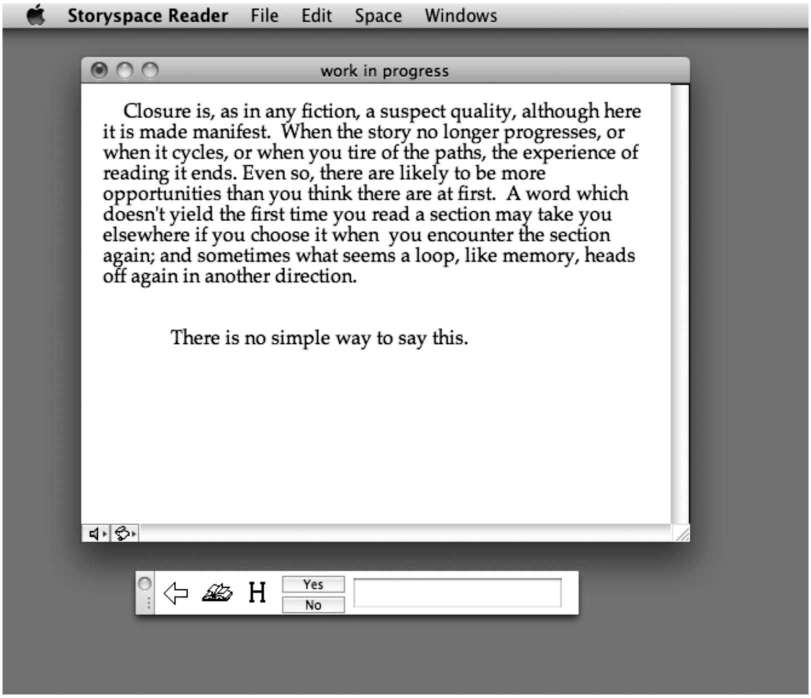
On closer examination, however, we find that this passage withholds information about navigating this text that the reader needs to grasp, suggesting a mismatch between rhetorical theorists' conception of the authorial audience and the knowledge that readers/users need to have to make sense of the work's overall design. Compare Joyce's explanation of the experience of *afternoon* with J. Yellowlees Douglas's (2000) well-known description of reading the novel:

> Since the segment "I call" also refused to default the first time I encountered it, what distinguishes my first and last experiences of this physical cue? Why does it prompt me, the first time I come across it, to read the narrative again from the beginning, pursuing different connections, yet prompt me to stop reading the second time? The decision to continue reading after my first encounter with "I call" reflected my awareness that the first reading of *afternoon* visited only 36 places out of a total of 539—leaving the bulk of the narrative places still to be discovered on subsequent readings. (102)

Douglas and Joyce both seem to be focusing on the same phenomena: the experience of reading the narrative and the frustrations readers are likely to encounter. Both writers depend on their implied readers' prior knowledge about *afternoon* and its place in relation to a whole range of conventions connected with narrative and genre. But the tone and style of these two passages are very different. Douglas is considerably more direct and specific about the design of the work and the number of lexias contained in it, the choices that readers make, and how readers are to navigate the work. Looking back on the "work in progress" lexia, we can now notice a lack of specificity. If Joyce wants to explain how the story works, why *not* tell the reader how many lexias it contains in total? Why not reveal which words on the screen are links? Why depend on vague phrasing like "A word which doesn't yield" and "heads off again in another direction" instead of referring more specifically to guard links and reading options? Likewise, why does this passage make no reference to the mechanics of the reading, and to the fact that the reader can reveal the available linked words by clicking on a book icon below the main screen (fig. 1)?

We might think that Joyce simply wants to keep some of this information hidden (especially the total number of lexias in the work); yet understanding most of these user interface elements is fundamental to basic reader competence. Why make no reference to that interface? The answer, I think, is far-reaching in its implications: in this passage, Joyce wants to maintain the illusion of being a storyteller rather than the constructor of the artifact with which the reader is presently interacting. This is why his description is more euphemistic than direct, and why he seems unable to make precise references to the brute facts of the interface. In effect, Joyce distinguishes between author and designer—even though both roles are performed by the real-life person, Michael Joyce.

Narratology based on printed stories has not yet developed language for talking about the way that electronic texts guide their users to understand these rules. However, this kind of reader positioning has been explored in some detail in connection with one genre of electronic narratives: the text-adventure game or, as it is more commonly described today, interactive fiction. In particular, I draw here on Espen Aarseth's concept of *intrigue* as a reader/text dynamic unique to this storytelling medium, arguing that Aarseth's account provides a model for describing how the reader comes to grasp textual rules in electronic narratives in general. In coining this term, Aarseth (1997) hopes to save games from their "colonization" by narrative study, and so it should be no surprise that he rejects the idea that when maneuvering through interac-



Closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends. Even so, there are likely to be more opportunities than you think there are at first. A word which doesn't yield the first time you read a section may take you elsewhere if you choose it when you encounter the section again; and sometimes what seems a loop, like memory, heads off again in another direction.

There is no simple way to say this.

Fig. 1. User Interface in *afternoon*

tive fiction we are simply getting a traditional story in a somewhat more complex and challenging way. For him, "there is no story at all, in the traditional sense" (112), because we can never be sure that the actions that we take while playing will turn out to be narratively significant. Aarseth instead suggests that the concept of intrigue captures the different structure of activity in which players/readers engage when encountering interactive fiction:

> There is nevertheless a structuring element in these texts, which in some ways does the controlling or at least motivates it. As a new term for this element I propose *intrigue*, to suggest a secret plot in which the user is the innocent, but voluntary target (*victim* is too strong a term), with an outcome that is not yet decided—*or* rather with several possible outcomes that depend on various factors, such as the cleverness and experience of the player. (112)

Aarseth explains that in an ergodic text like interactive fiction, "intrigue is directed against the user, who must figure out for herself what is going on" (113).[4] The target of the intrigue he calls the *intriguee* to parallel the *narratee*, and the entity responsible for creating the whole structure he names the *intrigant*, as a parallel to the *narrator*. I depart from Aarseth's handling of the concept by seeing the structure of intrigue as independent from, yet parallel and complementary to, the structure of narration. Aarseth's goal is to offer an alternative to traditional narrative terms; we are caught in an intrigue to the extent that we are not experiencing a story, he claims. My suggestion, instead, is to see intrigue as a component of all electronic texts and to recognize that those texts may, nonetheless, also have narrative elements like narrators and narratees. Indeed, I think that intrigue becomes even more interesting when combined with traditional narrative elements—as my discussion of the complex layering of voices and readerly roles in *afternoon*'s "work in progress" lexia has already begun to suggest.

Three Examples of the Relation between Narration and Intrigue

In this section I explore a variety of case studies that illustrate the analytic advantages of distinguishing between narration and intrigue in electronic narratives.

Let us begin with interactive fictions, since Aarseth developed his theory of intrigue on the basis of this subcorpus of electronic narratives. Initially, the reader's positioning in interactive fiction would seem to be identical to that of second-person narration in print, since in both cases the reader is described as "you." More specifically, the player character in these stories seems very much an instance of what Phelan (1989) has described as a "characterized audience":

> a characterized audience is created whenever a narrator, using direct address, ascribes attributes to his or her audience. From the perspective of the narrative audience, the characterized audience may be either real or hypothetical—that is, it may be an actual character such as Shreve McCanlin in *Absalom, Absalom!* or any number of figures in epistolary novels, or it may be a construction of the narrator such as the various Sirs and Madams invented by Tristram Shandy. (136)

In some ways, *characterized audience* is merely another way of describing the narratee (139), but Phelan's articulation emphasizes the potential tension between characterized and narrative audiences. In the case of *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, for example, Phelan (1989) notes that Calvino's strategy is to "vary the thickness of the screen between the narrator and the narrative audience erected by the use of the characterized audience" (142). This tension is particularly rich in interactive fiction, since these games will often attribute far greater specificity to the player's actions than his or her inputted commands indicate. To take a trivial example, one of the first tasks in the early adventure game *Zork* is to open a window to enter a house. In response to the command "open window," the player is told, "With great effort, you open the window far enough to allow entry." In describing the "great effort" used here, the game characterizes the audience independently of the player's choices.

But this description of the structure of *narration* tells us little about the actions that we must take as the agent responsible for moving the player through the game—that is, the structure of *intrigue* and our role as *intriguee*. In fact, the available vocabularies for describing what we are *doing* as the player are imprecise. Nick Montfort (2007) has recently critiqued the idea that in interactive fiction we are "playing" the character in a theatrical sense. Montfort notes

> there is no real role to play, only an existing history that waits to be discovered. The player character can be steered through the station to recover his memory. But the interactor does little more than steer and sense. The author, not the player, is the one who decides when the player will cry, the one who defines all the details of the player character's earlier and more expressive actions and reactions. (141)

In other words, what players must *do* is independent of (or at least orthogonal to) their identity as the characterized audience. Hence one of the more challenging features of early interactive fiction: the reader is given a character identity but then forced to behave in a way that makes little sense for that character.

Take, for example, the influential early game *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams and Meretzky 1984). Although certainly not as aesthetically sophisticated as more recent interactive fiction, this early game reflects particularly clearly the contrast between the roles of characterized audience and intriguee in this genre of electronic writing. At the beginning of this story the player is defined as Arthur Dent asleep in his bedroom, but the player has none of the knowledge about Dent's house or possessions that the character himself could be assumed to have: "You wake up. The room is spinning very gently round your head. Or at least it would be if you could see it which you can't. It is pitch black." Even after standing up, turning on the light, and finding Dent in his own bedroom, the player knows little about the house and possible courses of action. More importantly, as the story progresses, successful actions depend less on proper responses to exigencies in the storyworld than on knowledge of the book on which the game is based. Shortly after leaving the bedroom, for example, the player must stop the approach of a bulldozer intended to knock down Dent's house by lying down in the bulldozer's path and waiting for his friend Ford Prefect to appear—a course of action that mimics Adams's original novel, but that would make little sense otherwise. Our responsibilities as intriguee have little to do with pretending to be Dent, the characterized audience; as Monfort says, "the interactor is simply not working very hard to act in a manner particular to a character, as is done when playing a dramatic role" (139). I think that we can push Montfort's observation further and note that the structure of intrigue will be inflected differently in different sorts of texts. In some works of interactive fiction, exploration is central, and we are quite literally "steering" the player character through a mysterious location. But in *Hitchhiker's Guide* our role as intriguee is quite different: we are challenged to draw on our knowledge of the original book in order to solve these puzzles. In this sense the intriguee is not Dent himself, but a fan of Adams's novel, drawing on knowledge of how the story must go in order to progress. Here the gap between characterized audience and intriguee is clear.

Let's return to Joyce's *afternoon* to see how the distinction between intrigue and narration helps us to understand the dynamics of reader positioning when we no longer have a well-defined characterized audience with which to identify. Critics have noted that the identity of the narrator of various lexia in this story is quite complex. Alice Bell (2010), in particular, has unpacked how Joyce seems to create a third-person narrator only to reveal later that such narration is actually the work of the story's primary, first-person narrator, Peter (43). Other passages (like the "yes6" lexia), however, are narrated from the point of view of Peter's antagonist Wert and refer to Peter in the third person.[5] And even in those passages in which Peter remains the narrator, the narratee changes, shifting between a general narratee and the more specific character whom Bell calls Peter's "confidante" (43). Likewise, as I've already suggested, Joyce muddies the distinction between these narrators and a level of discourse in the story that reflects Joyce's own voice as the story's author.[6] In the "twenty questions" lexia Joyce appears to pose to the reader metafictional questions about the story—"Who is sleeping with whom, and why?"—although the lexia could also represent Peter's self-questioning. Another lexia, "Blowup," refers to the characters in the third person in a voice that seems to be that of the author: "The pure ennui of the industrial landscape not unlike the absentedness of these characters' lives, also broken by occasional passion." Is this Peter reflecting on his own account, or Joyce talking about the story he has written? It seems Joyce designed *afternoon* to make such questions impossible to answer.

In contrast to the story's ambiguous narrators, the intrigant is a much more straightforward figure who challenges readers to navigate the world of the narrative with little guidance and tells them that repetition will be necessary. Our exploration of this work is largely blind and is the result of an intrigant who clearly wants to frustrate the reader's traditional sense of closure. Further, in parallel with discussions of interactive fiction, critics sometimes want to translate the demands that intrigue makes on the reader into those made by acts of narration and to blur the role of intriguee and narratee. Thus, in discussing the hidden "white afternoon" lexia, Ryan (2006) attempts to provide a motivation for the tasks that the intrigant has given us: "This sequence suggests that the dialogue with the therapist unlocked guilt feelings in the narrator or led to a more lucid self-awareness" (138). Joyce himself made a similar observation about the story in a conversation with Douglas: "In order to physically get to 'white afternoon,' you have to go through therapy with Lolly, the way Peter does" (Douglas 2000: 100). But though such explanations are suggestive, they are ultimately misleading. While the story's intrigue may have a metaphorical similarity to the events of the story—our working through these associations is in some ways *like* being in therapy—trying to find out what happened in the story eventually becomes a matter of following links until we feel we understand their design principle. Douglas makes this clear in her explanation of why she felt she had "completed" *afternoon*: "my interpretation of the significance of 'white afternoon' is tied to my perception of 'I call' as a central junction in the structure of the text and of 'white afternoon' as a peripheral, deeply embedded, and relatively inaccessible place" (105). Douglas describes her reading not as a narratee being addressed by Peter but as an intriguee challenged to uncover the structural rules for the text. Although hidden, this design has none of the ambiguity we see in the story's narration.

The deployment of intrigue and narration in *afternoon* is especially striking when we compare Joyce's text with another hypertext work, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995). Since both works were created using Eastgate's Storyspace program, we might expect the design of intrigue to be largely the same; in fact, however, the nature of the intrigue is quite different. Granted, the structure of the narration in *Patchwork Girl* has superficial similarities to the narrative structure of *afternoon*. Like *afternoon*, Jackson's story depends on several narrators (the monster, its creator, Jackson herself), and like Joyce's work, Jackson's text intersperses localized, personal stories with broader, more philosophical reasoning. Thus the lexia titled "resurrection" begins: "The human, more than human resurrected body is a body restored to wholeness and perfection, even to a perfection it never achieved in its original state." But while *afternoon*'s narration mixes heterogeneous elements to create confusion, *Patchwork Girl*'s variations of style tend to reflect the movement between broad and specific commentary on the text's core concerns. Hayles (2005) notes that Jackson's use of links is "argumentative" (154) and that she frequently uses the transition between lexias to provide commentary on other texts—as when she reprints Mary Shelley's 1831 preface to her novel *Frankenstein* and provides the monster's comments (156). In designing the text's intrigue, Jackson made her story easy to navigate. She reveals the structure of the text by providing a Storyspace "map," as well as using a series of metaphorical characterizations of the text to create a central launching point for the story; these characterizations figure the text as a graveyard, a journal, a quilt, a story, "& broken accents." The movement between lexias is more coherent and easier to predict; even jumps between narrators are less confusing than in *afternoon* because the reader's primary task is considering the plot-based, thematic, and philosophical dimensions of the text—rather than trying to uncover the design principle for the work and thereby retrieve relatively inaccessible lexias. Yet as with *afternoon* there is a homology between the design of the intrigue and the design of the narration: just as the story provides a central starting point based around core metaphors to which the reader can always return, so too the narration appears to move between poetic comparisons and more specific, almost essayistic, reflections on what is going on.

I conclude with one final example that shows how narration and intrigue can form distinct but complementary textual systems in electronic narratives. The work that I have in mind is a short electronic text called *Outrances* (Ichikawa, Crofts, and Dvorak 2010), which was published in the online *Born Magazine*. This journal explicitly describes its works as "collaborative" and its editorial challenge as "matchmaking"—that is, establishing a relationship between writer and designer; thus the journal frequently produces interactive electronic "interpretations" of poems previously published in print.[7] When *Outrances* launches, we are greeted with a screen showing the interface designers Scott Ichikawa and James Dvorak holding a photograph of the textual author, Thomas H. Crofts III. Ichikawa and Dvorak are dressed casually and are caught yelling rambunctiously, while the picture of Crofts shows him as the stereotypical dour author, dressed in a tie and smoking a pipe (fig. 2). The opening of the work reminds readers forcefully and ironically that the text has two separate sources: author and designer.

Crofts's original twenty-line poem is divided into two halves; the first narrates being awakened from private immersion in music on a cassette tape, and the second shifts to the "crowds some sworling host" affected by music. The context of these events is obscure, and no reference is made to the audience directly. Instead, we are encouraged by an epigraph describing a band performance to reflect on the poem's theme of losing oneself in music. As the authorial audience, we might view the work's striking abruptness and refusal to provide context for these reflections

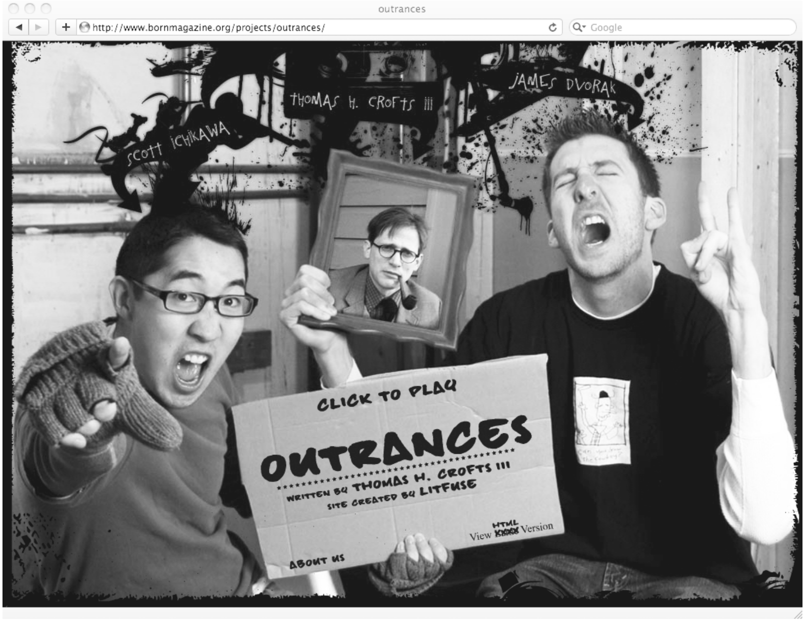

outrances
http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/outrances/
Google
Scott Ichikawa
Thomas H. Crofts III
James Dvorak
CLICK TO PLAY
OUTRANCES
WRITTEN BY THOMAS H. CROFTS III
SITE CREATED BY LITFUSE
View HTML Version
ABOUT US

Fig. 2. Opening Screen for *Outrances*

as an example of the poem's account of aesthetic disorientation. Turning to the user's responsibilities as intriguee, we find a structure of intrigue that has a thematic connection to the story that the poem tells about being lost in music. *Outrances* places the text of this poem on physical objects amid the detritus of urban life. More specifically, the text is inscribed onto the sort of handmade, photocopied posters that would be used to advertise the performance of a local band. These posters are affixed to every sort of surface—from designated community bulletin boards to dumpsters and the sides of buildings (fig. 3).

The work moves forward through the city, zooming in on one poster after another, pausing long enough for the user to read the text, and then zooming out to move on to another location in the city. In fact, the reader often cannot immediately tell where the text of the poem will be in a particular scene, since such handmade posters litter the landscape; it is only when the work zooms in on the particular words of the poem, cropping out other bits of text, that those words are revealed to

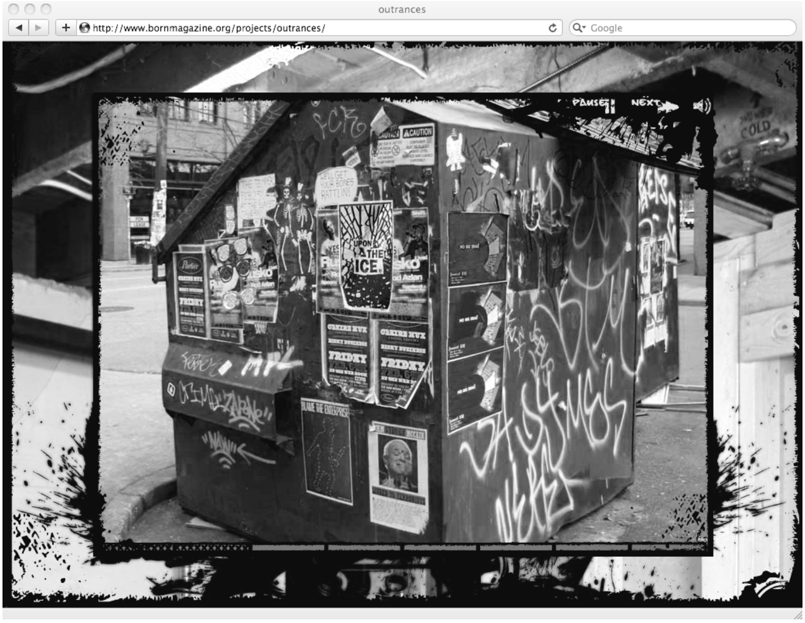


Fig. 3. Urban Landscape in *Outrances*

the reader. As intriguee, then, the reader is positioned as an explorer of urban life, gradually discovering poetry amid the seeming chaos of the landscape. The reader is not asked to choose a path here, but merely to recognize the text when it appears. In *Outrances* narration and intrigue are connected thematically: both are concerned with finding order in chaos, with losing oneself in art, and with the process of connecting to and differentiating oneself from crowds. Here narration and intrigue are independent but thematically complementary textual systems.

Conclusion

In my discussion of these case studies, I hope to have demonstrated the complexity of reader positioning in electronic narrative. This complexity is not unique to the electronic medium; choose-your-own-adventure and children's pop-up books likewise create an intriguee role for their readers. But the electronic medium makes these possibilities easier to define and manipulate, and thus more central to the experience of these texts. Further, as my own discussion suggests, our critical language is only now catching up to these innovations in electronic storytelling. We gain considerably by seeing intrigue as a structure that exists amid the familiar dynamics of author, narrator, and reader; this approach provides a way to talk about the overlapping and potentially contradictory roles that readers take on when engaging with electronic texts. At times readers are part of the narrative audience, at times they shift to look at the story from the point of view of the authorial audience, and throughout they are aware of the task of being the intriguee charged with navigating the work. But my larger point is that factoring in the concepts of intrigue, intrigant, and intriguee allows the voices and roles at play in a work like *afternoon* to be explored in a more fine-grained, nuanced way. Obviously, my argument for the existence of a system of intrigue alongside the structure of narration leaves many elements of this relationship to be explored in future work. In electronic narratives, does it make sense to postulate an implied designer alongside an implied author? How does the difference between the intradiegetic narratee that we see in interactive fiction and the (largely) extradiegetic narratee that we see in *Patchwork Girl* affect how we recognize (and perform) our responsibilities as intriguee? Are common narratological distinctions between reliable and unreliable, covert and overt narrators also relevant to the concept of the intrigant?[8]

Beyond providing a more sophisticated language for textual analysis, identifying intrigue as an element of electronic texts that is distinct from but complementary to a work's narration, theme, and plot also affords new perspectives on the ostensibly intractable conflict between the role of story and game in electronic texts—and thus on the dispute between "ludologists" like Aarseth (1997) and Markku Eskelinen (2004), who argue that these works are best treated as representing a wholly new medium in which play is the central dynamic, and narrative-oriented critics like Ryan (2001, 2006) and Henry Jenkins (2004), who argue that part of readers' pleasure in such texts arises from "the emotional residue of previous narrative experiences" (Jenkins 2004: 119). This conflict or tension can be resolved, I think, by recognizing that electronic narratives depend on two separate textual systems: narration and intrigue. Relevant here is Ken Perlin's (2004) astute observation that our relationship to video-game characters is fundamentally different from what we experience in novels, where "the agency of a protagonist takes over, and we are swept up in observation of his struggle [. . .], watching but never interfering" (14). Video games, by contrast, ask the player to be responsible for actions performed in the storyworld. Perlin is right, but he fails to trace through fully enough the consequences of this observation. The point is that electronic narratives ask readers to do two different things: to respond to a story as the addressee of narration and to move the text forward as the intriguee. Adding intrigue to our critical vocabulary alongside narration thus allows us to illuminate readers' complex modes of agency in these stories.

Notes

1. I am using the category of *electronic narratives* in a broad sense, which includes the most familiar examples of what has come to be called electronic literature—namely, hypertext narrative and interactive fiction. These modes involve writing that has been created to be experienced in a computer-mediated environment. Much of what I have to say here about reader positioning may apply to forms of electronic narrative in which writing is marginal, such as video games, but such modes lie outside the scope of my discussion. For a good discussion of whether the term *electronic literature* can apply to works without words, see N. Katherine Hayles's introduction to *Electronic Literature* (Hayles 2008: 3–5).
2. For a critique of the universal application of the concept of the narrator, see Richard Walsh (1997).
3. This is the same kind of comment that Nick Montfort (2003) identifies with the "voice of the parser" in interactive fiction, which is "extranarrative, and need not correspond to any of [a work's] narrators" (31).
4. Aarseth (1997) defines the ergodic text as one in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1).
5. See Bell (2010) for a table summarizing the various lexia that make up this Peter-Wert exchange (53).
6. For a good summary of these various narrators, see Jill Walker (1999).
7. See "Born is experimenting," http://www.bornmagazine.org/submissions.html.
8. A nice example of how some of these common narratological distinctions can be extended to intrigue is provided by the tongue-in-cheek game *Plants vs. Zombies* (2010), in which players are charged with defending their home by deploying various plants that shoot, immobilize, or eat waves of onrushing

zombies. If the player selects the *help* button, the game provides the following instructions: "When the Zombies show up, just sit there and don't do anything. You win the game when the Zombies get to your houze [sic]." In smaller print, the reason for this poor advice is explained: "this help section brought to you by the Zombies." Here we seem to have a dramatized, homodiegetic intrigant who is moreover unreliable.

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