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The Interlocutor in Print and Digital Fiction: Dialogicity, Agency, (De-)Conventionalization

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ABSTRACT

Digital fiction typically puts the reader/player in a cybernetic dialogue with various narrative functions, such as characters, narrative voices, or prompts emanating from the storytelling environment. Readers enact their responses either verbally, through typed keyboard input, or haptically, through various types of physical interactions with the interface (mouseclick; controller moves; touch). The sense of agency evoked through these dialogic interactions has been fully conventionalized as part of digital narrativity. Yet there are instances of enacted dialogicity in digital fiction that merit more in-depth investigation under the broad labels of anti-mimeticism and intrinsic unnaturalness (Richardson, 2016), such as when readers enact pre-scripted narratees without, however, being able to take agency over the (canonical) narrative as a whole (Dave Morris's *Frankenstein*), or when they hear or read a "protean," "disembodied questioning voice" (Richardson, 2006: 79) that oscillates between system feedback, interior character monologue and supernatural interaction (Dreaming Methods' *WALLPAPER*). I shall examine various intrinsically unnatural examples of the media-specific interlocutor in print and digital fiction and evaluate the extent to which unconventional interlocutors in digital fiction may have anti-mimetic, or defamiliarizing effects.

KEYWORDS

digital fiction; unnatural narrative; anti-mimetic; interlocutor; dialogicity.

RESUMO

A ficção digital tipicamente coloca o leitor/jogador num diálogo cibernético com várias funções narrativas, tais como personagens, vozes narrativas ou sugestões que emanam do ambiente narrativo. Os leitores acionam as suas respostas verbalmente, por meio de entrada digitada no teclado, ou por meio de vários tipos de interações físicas com a interface (clique do rato, movimentos do controlador, toque). O sentido de agência evocado através dessas interações dialógicas encontra-se totalmente convencionado como parte da narratividade digital. No entanto, existem exemplos de dialogismo encenado na ficção digital que merecem investigação mais aprofundada sob as designações latas de antimimetismo e não-naturalidade intrínseca (Richardson, 2016), como quando os leitores se tornam narratários pré-definidos sem, no entanto, poderem ter agência sobre a narrativa (canônica) como um todo (*Frankenstein* de Dave Morris), ou quando ouvem ou leem uma "protean," "disembodied questioning voice" (Richardson, 2006: 79) que oscila entre o feedback do sistema, o monólogo interior da personagem e a interação sobrenatural (*WALLPAPER* da Dreaming Methods). Examino vários exemplos intrinsecamente não naturais de interlocutores medialmente específicos em ficção impressa e digital e avalio até que ponto os interlocutores não convencionais na ficção digital podem ter efeitos antimiméticos ou de desfamiliarização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

ficção digital; narrativa não-natural; antimimético; interlocutor; dialogicidade.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article was inspired by my current book project, which examines digital fiction through the lens of unnatural narratology (Ensslin & Bell, forthcoming). Digital in the sense of digital-born fiction is "fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al., 2010). It is fiction whose structure, form, and meaning are dictated by the computational context in which it is produced and received. It includes works of hypertext fiction, Flash fiction (as well as fiction produced using other digital multimedia software and programming languages, such as QuickTime and JavaScript), Interactive Fiction (IF), App-fictions for tablets and smartphones, immersive 3D fiction and narrative videogames that experiment with and subvert conventions of ludonarrativity and/or feature innovative forms of verbal art.[1]

A subfield of postclassical narratology looks at so-called unnatural narratives, which is something of a misnomer because the kind of narratives that come under this label are just as naturally produced as any other kinds of storytelling, and yet they are distinctive in how they push conventional boundaries and stretch the limits of logical thought. In particular, unnatural narratology is concerned with questions surrounding physical and logical impossibilities in experimental fiction in particular. It examines the extent to which these so-called unnatural structures can be read in such a way as to be naturalized, through cognitive processes, and indeed conventionalized, and it acknowledges that, in some cases, so-called un-naturalizing readings (in the sense of interpretations that embrace aporia, incohesion, and incomprehensibility) are the appropriate way of engaging with unnaturalness. In this article I concentrate on one aspect of unnatural narratology, which is extreme narration, and I zoom in on the elusive phenomenon of what Brian Richardson (2006) refers to as the interlocutor, or interlocutor-narrator.

Unnatural narratives are defined *ex negativo*, as narratives that defy the principles of what Monika Fludernik (1996, drawing on Labov 1972) calls "natural narratives," which are the kind of non-fictional stories that we experience on a daily basis for example when we talk to our friends about what we did at

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1   For an in-depth exploration of literary games, see Ensslin 2014.

the weekend, or what we've read in the news. Thus, "[t]he unnatural (or impossible) is measured against the foil of 'natural' (i.e. real-world) cognitive frames and scripts which are derived from our bodily existence in the world (see Fludernik 1996: 22) and involve natural laws and logical principles as well as standard human limitations of knowledge" (Alber, 2013). According to Jan Alber (2013), unnatural narratives can only be fictional because they defy two important elements of "natural" storytelling: (a) our own real-world cognitive frames, i.e. our assumptions of what is physically and logically possible, and (b) the conventions of so-called natural narratives (e.g. that there's a logical sequence of cause and effect, and that human beings cannot be in two physical places at the same time).

Stefan Iversen (2013) evokes the concept of a human-size anthropomorphic beetle to explain the workings of unnatural narratives: there are at least three ways in which a creature like this can be read: (1) along the lines of Kafka's "Metamorphosis," where the conflicts caused by a human mind in an insect body cannot be resolved in the course of the narrative, thus leaving readers alienated throughout; (2) a scenario where a human being wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant bug, but finds out later that it was only a dream; or (3) a scenario where a story features a giant humanoid bug that can walk and talk like a human being and has to be fought off as a monster in a fantasy fiction or videogame. The main difference between these three readings is the extent to which the meaning of the human bug can be naturalized – for example through what Alber (2016: 49-54) calls an "internalizing" or "subjectifying" cognitive strategy, where the biological impossibility is attributed to a dream or other form of subconscious event (as in scenario 2); or through a "generification" strategy, which embeds the impossibility in a fully conventionalized genre tradition: i.e. that in fantasy fiction supernatural things do and need to happen, as in scenario 3. Finally, to make sense of a diegetically unresolvable conflict as laid out in scenario 1, we need to employ either a "Zen reading" that embraces the strangeness of the narrative and "stoic[ally]" refrains from attempting to naturalize the unnatural (Alber, 2016: 54), or possibly an "allegorizing" reading, which sees Kafka's protagonist Gregor Samsa as an extended, metaphoric representation of a general human identity conflict. Importantly, some unnatural narratologists will only accept readings of the latter type as cases of actual unnaturalness, whereas others follow a broader definition that includes anything that is biologically, physically, or logically impossible, regardless of the intended aesthetic effects of a narrative.

Hence, broadly speaking, there are two general perspectives on unnatural narrative theory, which are only partly compatible. There is an *extrinsic* approach, which assumes, with Jan Alber (2013), that unnatural narratives are any fictional narratives that "[v]iolate physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world" (n.p.). This approach is directly derived from Fludernik's natural narratology and subsumes anything from speaking animals and floating islands

to time travel, multiple storylines and ontological metalepsis (transgressing boundaries between fictional and actual world). Alber's focus lies on how human beings read and make sense of these impossibilities, and links them to cognitive theories such as schemata, frames and scripts. The reading options outlined above (subjectification, generification, allegorization, and a Zen approach) are examples of cognitive strategies suggested by Alber (2016). Two additional reading strategies that I shall return to in this paper are "frame blending" and "positing a transcendental realm" (Alber 2016: 48, 53). Frame blending refers to the human capacity to combine previously disconnected frames and, in relation to unnatural narrative structures in particular, to "conduct seemingly impossible mapping operations to orient ourselves within storyworlds that refuse to be organized by real-world parameters only" (Alber, 2016: 48). When positing a transcendental realm, readers attribute the unnatural to some kind of supernatural setting, such as heaven or hell, where different and often supernatural or humanly incomprehensible laws are in place that shape the behavior of its participants.

Opposed to the *extrinsic* unnatural narratological approach is the *intrinsic* approach, followed for example by Brian Richardson (2016). Richardson is far less invested in the "unnatural" in the sense of physical or biological impossibilities and more interested in the effects of anti-mimetic, or anti-conventional elements in a narrative. His focus is on the kinds of narrative "representations that contravene the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violate mimetic expectations and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres" (2010: 3). In other words, Richardson and his followers are not interested in fully conventionalized elements like supernatural beings in fantasy or gothic fiction, which are *non*-mimetic in the sense of exceeding real-world experiential frames, but not *anti*-mimetic, or anti-conventional. Instead, he concentrates on works that "break (or only partly enter into) the mimetic illusion," works that seek to alienate and defamiliarize the audience, for example through mutually contradictory plot elements (Coover's "The Babysitter"), or antinomic chronologies (Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*), or narrative voices that are strikingly inconsistent, incoherent, and/or intangible.

II. INTERLOCUTION IN PRINT FICTION

In his influential book, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006), Brian Richardson identifies a number of what he calls "extreme narrating agents which exist at the very boundaries of narration" (79). One of them is "the figure of the interlocutor, or disembodied questioning voice ... that poses questions which the narrative goes on to answer" (79). Richardson differentiates this essentially "protean" figure from voices that can be more clearly defined, such as narrators talking to themselves, or even narrators addressing the reader in cases of rhetorical metalepsis. Essentially, "for much of

the text it is not clear what the status of these [interlocuting] voices are" (80), which can oscillate between narrator and narratee, thus blurring these categories, or seemingly emanate from one or more communicative sources.

An early example of a questionable interlocutor figure is the narrator in Dostoevsky's 1864 *Notes from the Underground*. Here, and in other places throughout the text, he is imagining vocal responses from one or more hypothetical interlocutors "with such precision that they may point to an origin in the narrator's obsessions rather than any mimesis of others' probable speech" (Richardson 2006: 80). Richardson's main case study is the "Ithaca" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which Richardson calls "the source of most modern experiments" (2006: 81). The chapter consists of about 2,300 lines of questions and answers, which Joyce himself identifies as "catechism, impersonal." But, as Richardson (2006) argues, it is a "very strange kind of anti-catechism, couched in exaggerated scientistic language and containing much more narrative and description than standard doctrine or useful knowledge" (81).

It is important to remember here the ultimately monologic nature of projected catechistic dialogicity. The standard, ecclesiastic genre serves as a pedagogic tool conveying to a congregation or student a catalogue of rules and doctrinal thinking patterns that are supposed to be internalized. The respondent "does not respond personally to the question but rather internalizes the answer which the questioner has already supplied" (Hampson, 1996: 230). This reduces the respondent's agency to zero, and makes them a discursive tool for the hegemonic voice behind the interlocution.

Joyce, of course, coming from a background steeped in this and other kinds of religious indoctrination, aims to "test the limits" of the orthodox question and answer format, thus critiquing "the catechism's inversion of the function of dialogue and problematiz[ing] further the status of the speaking subject" (Richardson, 2006: 81). Thus, in the following example from "Ithaca" (which is fairly representative of most of the rest of the chapter) readers are left to muse upon who the speakers of the question and/or the answer:

> *What parallel courses did Bloom and Stephen follow returning?*
>
> Starting united both at normal walking pace from Beresford place they followed in the order named Lower and Middle Gardiner streets and Mountjoy Square, west: then, at reduced pace, each bearing left, Gardiner's place by an inadvertence as far as the farther corner of Temple street: then, at reduced pace with interruptions of halt, bearing right, Temple street, north, as far as Hardwicke place... (Joyce, Ulysses, "Ithaca," 17.1-7)

This and other passages from the same episode raise questions about intended levels of perceived orality, of whether or not we are dealing with one or two speakers, and what their status and relationship is vis-à-vis the main characters. Might the voice asking the questions even be a projected personification

of the implied reader, or of an envisioned narratee (along the lines of the Dosto-evsky example)? Might this be the figure of "the arranger," a term suggested by David Hayman [1982] "to designate the sensibility responsible for the many different voices and effects beyond those of *Ulysses'* main narrator"?

Richardson (2006) concludes that the elusive form of the interlocutor can be conceptualized either as a kind of "shapeless, contradictory, indeed monstrous [and yet somehow inherently consistent] supernarrator... bent on producing irreducible heterogeneity" (86) or indeed, as he seems to prefer, a more general, fluid concept of textuality that allows for "shifting, depersonalized, multivoiced texts that transcend or traduce the sensibility of a single narrator, a composite figure we may refer to as the 'incommensurate narrator'" (86).

Leaving terminological questions aside, what is most important in the context of extreme, or unnatural narration, is the defamiliarizing, anti-mimetic effect this and other interlocutor figures are intended to evoke in readers. Equally importantly, we have to remember that this effect is strongly anchored in the medium-specific affordances of narrative communication in print, which assumes a reader-recipient that is confronted with a fairly mono-modal and mono-directional narrative situation. This situation does not allow any significant agency as far as creative or narrative decision-making is concerned, so the reader's main challenge is to make sense of linguistically represented narrational ambiguities, without however actively participating in the construction of the story. In a nutshell, then, I would argue that the interlocutor as a form of extreme narration emerges from the unidirectional communication situation we typically find in print, and it is used to signal the monologic, inherently unnatural nature (following Fludernik) of standard, print-based literary communication.

The graph in fig. 1 shows Manfred Pfister's (1977: 20) frequently adapted Chinese box model of narrative communication in print fiction.[2] It visualizes the different intra- and extradiegetic layers involved, such as the empirical author (S4) addressing an empirical reader (E4) indirectly and asynchronously, through a written codex; the ideal author implied in the text (S3) vis-a-vis the implied reader (E3); the narrator (S2) addressing a narratee (E2) at the level of fictional mediation; and bi- or multidirectional dialogue between characters on the level of diegetic action (S/E1). What is striking about this model is how it depicts the unidirectionality of so-called "natural" narrative interlocution in print fiction, where readers – in most cases – receive what they are told rather than being able to talk back, and the same is generally true at narrator-narratee level. It is not true at the intradiegetic level, where characters talk multi-directionally — hence the label "S/E1" that reflects fictional characters' binary capacity of being sender and receiver (or "Empfänger," in Pfister's German original) at the same time.

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2 See also Janik, 1973; Fieguth, 1973; Chatman, 1978; Jahn, 2017; and Sobchack, 1995 in relation to film.
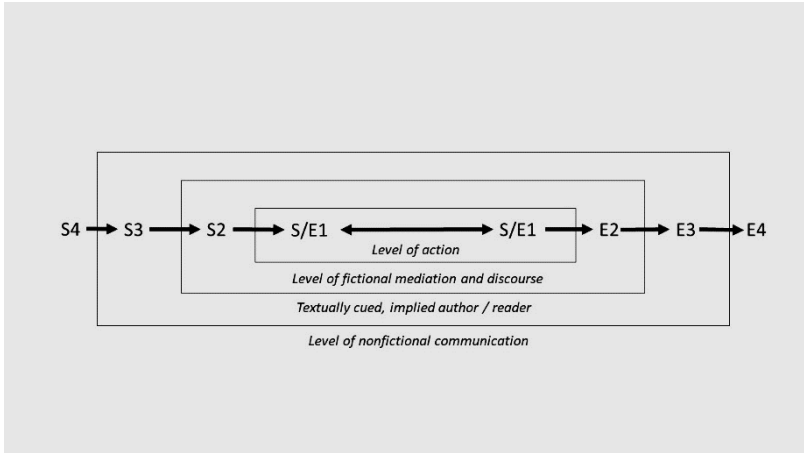
Figure 1. Chinese box model of narrative communication in print fiction (adapted from Pfister 1973 and Jahn 2017).

I argue that, in digital fiction, this unidirectionality is lifted and the reader essentially generates the narrative through kinetic (or extranoematic, see Aarseth 1997) and noematic interaction (rather than mostly noematic interaction, as in the case of print fiction). As Ben-Arie (2009) puts it,

> conventional media communication is ... characterized by the author's exclusive control over the narrative, while the viewer has no active part in the events taking place and does not affect the course of the work, although it is he or she who provides the work with meaning. Contrarily, in digital interactive works the viewer becomes a participant, and consequently the narrative itself is dependent on the viewer's participation. (153)

This underlying bidirectionality and reciprocity in the reader's interaction with different narrative roles and forms, which can include the narrator, the (implied) author, individual characters in the storyworld, as well as various extradiegetic, paratextual elements is the main reason that the interlocutor as extreme, unnatural form of narration in print is mostly conventionalized in *digital* fiction. That said, there are exceptions where the status of the interlocutor is not all that clear-cut, and where reader-players might therefore locate a certain degree of anti-mimetic experimentation. The following section reflects on such hybrid, quasi-experimental manifestations of the digital interlocutor and explores their likely anti-mimetic effects on the reader-player.

III.INTERLOCUTION IN DIGITAL FICTION

Digital narratives typically put the reader-player in a cybernetic, interactionally metaleptic (Bell, 2017) dialogue with various narrative functions, such as characters, narrative voices or prompts emanating from the storytelling environment. Readers typically enact their responses either verbally, through typed keyboard input, or haptically, through various types of physical interactions with the interface (mouseclick, controller moves, or touch). The sense of agency evoked by these dialogic interactions has been fully conventionalized as part of digital narrativity from commercial narrative videogames like *Dragon Age* (Bio-Ware, 2009-2014) to text adventures and interactive fiction. And yet, of course, despite the projection of genuine bilaterality and reader-player agency, interactive narratives underlie a pre-scripted supernarrative that ultimately delimits the interlocutory options available to the reader-player.

There has been an astonishing range of experimental creativity in relation to human-computer interaction in digital fiction and digital drama, exploring the possibilities of Turing-Test-style communication in particular (Marino, 2006). Mateas and Stern's *Façade* (2005), for example, stages a near-natural conversation between two artificial agents and the player, whose typed conversational turns result in character responses that are possible in a "natural" (Fludernikian) scenario yet not always likely. Still, we are here not really dealing with a Richardsonian situation, where the interlocutor narrator or narratee is perceived as protean, hybrid, or ontologically elusive.

It is important to recognize that the medium-specific qualities of digital fiction afford specific kinds of anti-mimetic interlocution, whereby we have to take conventionalized forms of high-agency player involvement into consideration. Hence, we need to adjust Richardson's concept to one of un-conventional, anti-mimetic, *digital* interlocution, where reader-players encounter unexpected forms of dialogicity that can, for example, put them in a dilemma between expected and constrained agency, or cause them to reflect on the unexpectedly complex personality and potential multi-vocality of the narrator-interlocutor facing them.

In this context it is worth revisiting Emily Short's Interactive Fiction, *Galatea* (2000). This dialogue-driven, mostly conversational text focuses on the eponymous mythical figure of a female statue that is perfected by her maker, Pygmalion, who falls in love with his creation after Venus brings her to life yet subsequently abandons her. Reader-players play the role of a visitor and critic of an Artificial Intelligence exhibition featuring Galatea, and their role is to find out as much as they can about Galatea's personality, history, her hopes and worries, and the difficult relationship she had with her maker. The text is thus anti-mimetic within its own genre as it takes a psychological, forensic rather than action-oriented approach. Reader-players have to ask Galatea questions and tell her about aspects of human life, in order to prompt utterances by her. In this process, the narrator-interlocutor assumes the role of a complex, multi-faceted

stage director. Most of the time s/he provides us with an inside view of the player-character, triggering and responding to Galatea's actions and utterances. But occasionally s/he shape-shifts into a meta-level commentator, transgressing the ontological boundary between fictional and actual world and reprimanding the player, for example, for wanting the player-character to tell Galatea about sex ("There are some things that fall out of your job description"). Other, more cryptic meta-comments advise the player about the logistics and rules of IF software interaction, such as the glossing remark, "(General questions: you can almost always find ones that haven't been anticipated)." Here, the passive structure "that haven't been anticipated" augments the disorienting effect of the remark, as the reader-player is left in the dark about who might not anticipate certain general questions: Galatea, or the system, or possibly even humankind in general. Admittedly, this interlocutor-narrator may not come across as permanently or pervasively alienating as Joyce's anti-catechism. However, we may still see it as an example of medium-specific dialogic anti-mimeticism that may be naturalized partly or fully through satirizing reading strategies (Alber, 2016).
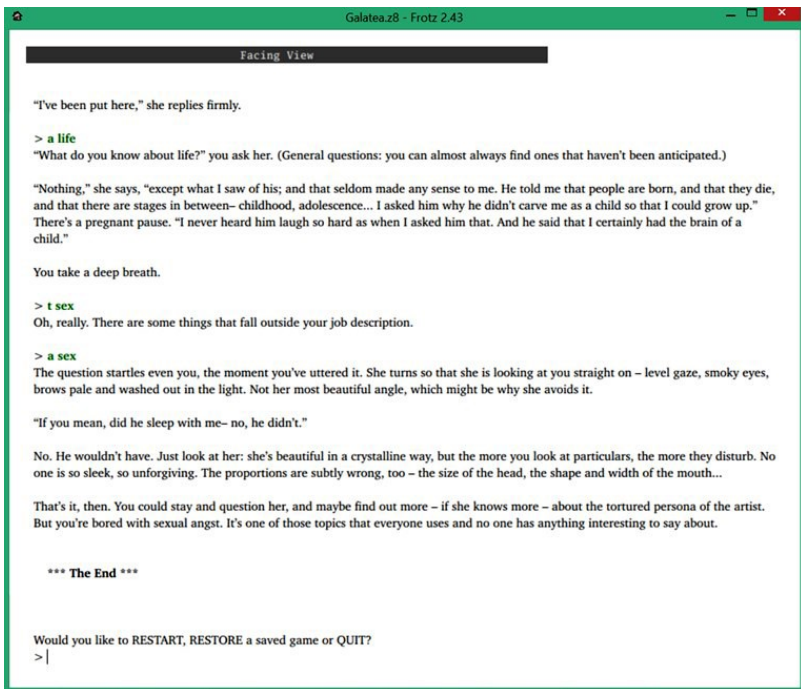

Figure 2. Section (screenshot) from Emily Short's Galatea.

Traces of antimimetic interlocution can also be identified in Dave Morris' (2012) Inkle-produced touchscreen remediation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.* This interactive adaptation of the original gothic novel embeds the reader-narratee in the fictional world as a new acquaintance and confidante of Victor

Frankenstein's. Interlocution in the sense of a conversation between the ho-modiegetic narrator and the fictionalized reader-narratee is an immersive effect created by this adaptation. The reader-narratee takes the role of a conversa-tional partner, making choices between various dialogue and plot options throughout, thus giving the narrative the feel of a choose-your-own-adventure game. Yet despite the flow of reading facilitated by this immersive interlocution, there is something peculiar about the way in which the agency that is intended to add to the reading experience is actually highly illusory. After all, readers will tend to know the plot of the original narrative, and the Inkle version does not offer any seriously deviating pathways as options, but rather detours. So, we might say here that canonically restricted agency adds a degree of alienation to the expected interactive reading experience. This does not equate to the kind of erased agency evoked by Joycean anti-catechistic writing. However, the clash between canonical fixity and interactive remediation subverts the conventions of emergent storytelling in the sense of individualized narrative experiences and may therefore be seen as liminally unconventional.

In addition, especially for readers familiar with Shelley's original novel, the first few questions posed by the self-enacted interlocutor are bound to cause an ontological hesitation in the reader. The interlocutor's questions are italicized to set them off from Victor's speech. However, there are no speech tags revealing who speaks at any given time, and the first question asked by the interlocutor in particular ("What is your name?") likely puzzles the reader, who is bound to ask who the question is addressed to. After all, from the introductory sections of the app fiction, we know that Victor is narrating his own story, and the reader-nar-ratee-interlocutor is introduced into the diegesis without any further explana-tion. Hence, and specifically for frequent player-readers of digital narratives and games, the "What is your name?" question is likely understood as a question to the reader-player, who is used to customizing their in-world identity by entering or choosing a name. Reading further quickly disambiguates this ontological hes-itation as it becomes obvious that the addressee has to be Victor Frankenstein, and that the speaker has to be the narratee-interlocutor that has been added in Morris' adaptation. Hence, the defamiliarizing effect operates on a temporary yet nonetheless powerful basis as readers have to adapt their expectations of medium-specific genre conventions (player address) to the unique dialogic de-sign of the Inkle story. Thus, what happens here in terms of reading strategies is a frame blend (Alber, 2016) between medium-specific genre expectations and adaptation-specific character constellation and dialogue.

My final and perhaps most striking example with respect to antimimetic interlocution is Judi Alston and Andy Campbell's immersive 3D fiction, *WALLPAPER* (Dreaming Methods, 2015). It tells the story of PJ Sanders, a British man now based in the US, whose elderly, widowed mother has recently died. PJ returns home to his mother's now-empty home in order to administer her finan-cial affairs and sell the house. Reader-players of *WALLPAPER* experience the 3D storyworld from PJ's first-person perspective and must navigate this storyworld,

using a mouse and keyboard. As the reader explores the house and its grounds, snippets of text emerge and reveal suppressed memories and snippets of family history that were previously unknown to PJ. The reader's goal is to find the key to the parlor, a room PJ Sanders was never allowed to enter as a child, and unlock the secrets of his past. PJ is a computer hardware engineer for a company called Poppitech and he has been tasked to develop a Visual Memory Extractor (VME) which extracts visual memories out of walls. PJ wears a prototype of the VME once he goes into the parlor and this is how he and the reader-player find out about his past.

Throughout the ludic-narrative experience, PJ soliloquizes (internally, presumably) about the memories, emotions, and other associative thoughts triggered by revisiting the house of his childhood. The language produced by this monologic dialogue and displayed on screen therefore seems to have been produced by player-character himself, whose personality initially comes across as fairly stable and consistent. However, in the course of the narrative, Sanders becomes gradually dissociated from this assumed stable identity, as well as the player's likely identification with him, as the voices he experiences in the house seem to multiply. He appears to hold uncanny written and spoken conversations with his late mother and father, for example, but the most anti-mimetic aspect of this protean interlocutor are the passages in which some alter ego seems to be speaking to him: "Come on, Sanders, just unlock the door, man" at the beginning of the narrative may be seen as an encouraging internal voice to Sanders as well as an instructional hint to the player before entering the house. More poignantly, however, in the latter half of the narrative, the voice seems to disconnect more strongly from the protagonist's intentions: "Upstairs? Are you crazy Sanders?" is displayed on screen as the player takes the avatar to the doom-inspiring upstairs rooms, thus going against the protagonist's likely intuitions following the traumatic experience in the forbidden room. Thus, in this example we can see the interlocutor as medium-specific, protean voice that oscillates between interior character monologue, system feedback, and supernatural character interaction, thus simulating or at least evoking the effects of childhood trauma and psychological repression. Thus, we may apply a combination of subjectifying and transcendentalizing (Alber, 2016) reading strategies to naturalize the plurality of voices projected on screen, as well as their sources.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article investigated medium-specific forms of the Richardsonian (2006) interlocutor, a specific type of extreme narration that confronts readers with a protean questioning voice that is difficult if not impossible to identify and attribute to any consistent or coherent manifestation of telling and therefore tends to have strong anti-mimetic effects. I discussed the interlocutor within the framework of unnatural narratology and applied a combination of intrinsic

(text-centered) and extrinsic (cognition-centered) concepts to three digital fictions featuring quasi-anti-mimetic interlocutors. I posited that interlocuting narrative voices are highly conventionalized within the medium-specific affordances of digital narratives and that, as a result, anti-mimetic instances may be harder to identify than in media featuring uni-directional narrative communication, such as print fiction. My reading of *Galatea* focused on the voice of a cryptic meta-commentator who seems to break the fourth wall and supplies the reader-player with metadiscursive instructions, for example, on conversational topics to avoid with Galatea. While intrusive, humorous, and/or sarcastic narration is a convention in text adventures that promote fun and entertainment (such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Zork*) rather than critical thought, in the rather more serious and gender-critical context of *Galatea*, an intrusive interlocutor like this appears curiously out of place and unconventional. In relation to Dave Morris' Inkle remediation of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, I pointed out the brief albeit poignant ontological hesitation emanating from an untagged questioning voice that novice readers will have to learn to disambiguate vis-à-vis the medium- and text-specific communication situation in Morris' novel. Being featured as Victor's friend and confidante in the storyworld readily causes readers to assume some kind of customization situation, similar to interactive fictions and dramas like *Façade*, where being asked to enter one's fictional name is a conventional pattern. Finally, the interlocutor in *WALLPAPER* oscillates between system feedback, interior character monologue and supernatural interaction, especially towards the end of the fiction, thus underscoring the protagonist's increasing mental distress and dissociation from self and reality.

Arguably, the works discussed in this paper may not have anti-mimetic effects of the kind of intensity evoked by a Joycean-type interlocutor, which deliberately pushes the limits of monodirectional communication characteristic of print. Yet, this article has demonstrated a number of textually manifest traces of anti-mimeticism in medium-specific interlocutors that may evoke certain degrees of bewilderment, amusement, alienation, or dissociation in the reader-player. Clearly, experimental digital fictions are an ideal testing ground for the otherwise naturalized, conventional metaleptic interaction between diegetic voice and reader-player input, this testing ground has only begun to be explored by writers of digital-born fiction and experimental narrative games. A question we might ask, following Richardson (2006: 86), is, whether in the works mentioned here and beyond, we are actually dealing with cases of a heterogeneous yet ultimately consistent *supernarrator*, representing a shape-shifting yet ultimately stable narratorial identity. Alternatively, we may find ourselves confronted with a more textual, fragmented category that allows for multiple, shifting voices, "that transcend or traduce the sensibility of a single narrator" and translate it into a "composite figure" – that of a medium-specific, "incommensurate" narrator (Richardson, 2006: 86). And yet, alternatively, we may ask whether this categorical question actually matters in an experiential and experimental paradigm that embraces fluidity and renders the reader-player a key

participant in the game of narrative communication and deliberately allows us to hover, float, and meander between different interlocuting roles, perspectives and positions.

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