

**Bangor University**

## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

### **Færwhile & the Multimodal Creative Practice: Composing Fiction from Analogue to Digital**

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***Færwhile* & the Multimodal Creative Practice:  
Composing Fiction from Analogue to Digital**

by

R. Lyle Skains

Presented to Bangor University in fulfilment  
of the thesis requirement for the degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

School of Creative Studies and Media  
College of Arts and Humanities  
Bangor University  
12 July 2013

## Summary

This practice-led research project explores the influence of digital tools on the composition of narrative. Its purpose was to create a fictional narrative in both analogue (print) and digital forms, observing and analysing the effects of this multimodal composition on the writer's creative practice, and on the resulting narratives. This project thus consists of both the creative artefacts and the critical exegesis that presents the analysis of the creative process and artefacts.

The creative artefacts encompass the analogue novella *Færwhile*, included in this bound thesis as print novella, and its digital counterpart, included in the attached DVD as HTML digital fiction. The digital fiction actualises the narrative's fabula through a variety of narrative media, including Flash fiction, blog fiction, interactive fiction, and hypertext. These platforms were chosen in order to gain a broader understanding of the available media and their literary affordances; the selection of each was based primarily on its suitability for best crafting and communicating the characters, themes, and voice of each individual story or chapter.

The critical thesis examines how composing multimodal texts refocuses the writer's cognitive composition process on media-specific semiotic translations, and results in texts that depart from traditional narrative forms into anti-linear structures engaging in unnatural narration. The chapters included present my practice-led methodology; an examination of how the specific materiality of digital media affords multimodal layering of meaning; an analysis of the shift from mimetic first- and third-person narration in work preceding this research to unnatural narration and anti-linear structures in both the analogue and digital artefacts; a discussion of the implicit collaboration that arises from appropriating digital resources such as visuals, audio, and source code shared online under Creative Commons licensing; and an exploration of how knowledge and awareness of digital technologies and ergodic literature results in changes to the composition process, shifting it from a monomodal translation of imagined story to written text, to a multimodal practice engaged in multiple media even in planning stages.

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## **List of Accompanying Materials**

*Færwhile: A Journey Through a Space of Time* — Digital Fiction on DVD

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***Færwhile:  
A Journey Through a Space of Time***

a novella  
by  
R. Lyle Skains

## Chapter 1

### Lost, Seeking Found

He stood on the pier and smoked, exhaling toward a passing woman in a suit and stiletto heels. She glared at him, and he grinned.

He claimed a bench in a fisherman's nook, his faded trench-coat and greasy hair repelling anyone else from the spot. Not bothering to check for prying eyes, he emptied his pockets into his lap.

Couple of measly dollars. A wadded-up pawn ticket that might be worth something. A rusted key, too old-fashioned to fit any locks in Marina del Rey or neighbouring Venice Beach.

The book captured his attention. He'd rolled the old drunk outside the rundown waterfront hotel for money, maybe even cigs or booze, but he hadn't expected anything of a literary nature to trickle from the guy's pockets. The bum had looked near death, the smells of sour alcohol and urine failing to cover the decay. He hadn't even moved when Ben slipped his possessions from the folds of his layered rags, and Ben had paused for a sec to see if the sack was even breathing. Larceny he was okay with, but cops finding him with a dead guy's stuff, that would land him back in the home for sure.

He'd grabbed the lot and shifted away, fading into the rollerbladers and surfers, so shiny in the sun. Now he swiped his hair off his forehead and turned the book over in his hand, letting the sunlight seep into its black cover. He'd been hoping it was something he could sell, maybe for a buck or two to the used bookshop on the Venice boardwalk, but the thing was weird. At first glance it looked like one of those leather-bound notebooks from the big bookstores. He found those big box stores useful, where he could sneak a cup of milk from the in-store coffee shop and hide in a corner, reading until the store closed. They were open later than libraries, and the minimum-wage employees cared less about protecting the sanctity of the establishment from vagrants than librarians did.

The cover was soft, buttery in his hands, reflecting the day's warmth. Her skin had felt like that. He closed his eyes and pushed his fingertips over the leather, hearing her ticklish giggle.

His breath stuttered, and he shook himself. *Not now*, he whispered, opening the book. The yellowed pages wafted a dusty, mouldy aroma that mingled with the seaweed breeze on the pier.

Words and drawings squirmed up at him. The pier tipped on its end, and he felt himself falling, tumbling toward the book. Penned lines cast walls about him, forming tunnels with twists and turns and chutes and ladders that swirled him, children laughing, crying—

Gasping and clutching at the bench, he slammed the book shut. He held it at arm's length, blinking. This was not beach reading.

Ben tucked the book inside his coat, close to his chest. His body curved away from it, but somehow he didn't feel comfortable with it out in the open.

—*Are you scared of a teensy weensy book?*

—Quiet.

Her laughter again, only this time it came from within his coat, muffled, as though she'd drunk the entire bottle of potion and slipped into an interior pocket. The book. He had to get out of here.

There was an empty house about 300 meters in from the boardwalk, where the property manager was lax about window latches and phone calls from concerned neighbours. He didn't use it all the time — he wasn't that stupid. Instead, he saved it for when he really needed the warmth of a furnished house, a place to sleep where he didn't need to keep one eye open and a hand on his possessions.

He'd never gone there in the daytime, definitely not the noon hour in the summer when the beaches were seething and anyone could see him. But the book warranted the risk.

He fished the key from behind the planter and slipped in the back door. He'd never damaged anything, never left any evidence, never given any reason for the property manager to increase security.

—*You're a very considerate squatter.*

He ignored the jibe, locking the door. The house smelled of upholstery cleaner and Windex; empty, but clean. Not abandoned, just...waiting.

The living area and kitchen, despite their reputation as the heart of the house, held no sway over him. He climbed the spiral stairs to the loft.

A mobile hung from the ceiling, Tigger eternally bouncing over Pooh and Eeyore. It was clearly kept for sentimental purposes, hanging over a child's bed rather

than a crib. Ben moved past it, feeling tall and awkward and grimy, stopping in the corner. This corner kept him returning to this house, though he knew it was risky, that if he were noticed hanging around, that if he were caught, he would wind up back in those institutionally green corridors, trapped in a cold room, waiting until he was eighteen so he could begin failing his life all over again.

But the corner held sway over him. A custom shelf stretched from floor to ceiling, bracketing a colourful rug that carved a quiet space. The books on the shelf were not arranged in any discernible order: Alice rested next to Grimm, Black Beauty was sandwiched between the Bobbsey twins and Harry Potter, Peter Pan winked mischievously from beneath an illustrated set of Bible stories for children.

His chest ached, as it did every time he eased himself to the carpet, for he'd found this sanctuary too late. He'd never given her this, never offered her a safe corner where she could follow her fictional friends into strange and adventurous worlds.

He sat on the floor now, careful not to brush against the brightly painted wall or the dust-free books. He never sat on the furniture, never used the kitchen utensils or left footprints on the rug.

He pulled the leather book from his coat, holding it gingerly in the California sunlight nosing through the shutters. He flipped through the first few pages, resisting the dizziness, forcing himself to stay in this room, to keep his mind in the here and now. The words tugged at him, and he forced his fingers through the carpet, the rough piling grounding him.

*—It's like they're written in blood, like that time we started that club, and regular ink on paper just wasn't cool enough.*

But this wasn't a pinprick worth of blood on some peeled tree bark. The words bled over the yellowed pages like wounds cut in flesh. He passed a fingertip over a short passage, expecting to feel the ridges and valleys of cuts, expecting his finger to come away damp and dark.

Some pages were unintelligible, not even recognisable as language — not any he'd ever seen, anyway. Some pages were drawings, dense like the back of a dollar bill, and he stared intently at them, waiting for the shapes and faces to emerge from the hashes and lines.

Toward the end of the notebook the images and text trickled out, until there was more page than ink. Until the lines and letters suddenly converged into English:

USE  
THE  
KEY

At the bottom of the page, there was a small drawing of a keyhole. He shifted, reaching into his pocket. The key he'd lifted from the old man was cool in his palm, and he laid it over the drawing. The outlines matched perfectly, and as the key touched the keyhole, it began to sink right into the book.

Ben yanked the key away. "No fucking way," he whispered. "Can you believe this, Lilly?"

There was no response.

He picked up the key. He tapped it all over the page, every spot except the middle, with its deep black hourglass silhouette. Nothing. Just metal on paper.

He touched the key to the centre of the page, to the drawing so fiercely inked the page was scored inward. Here the key slid seamlessly through the paper, through the entire notebook. Here, the solid, metal, real life key clicked smoothly into the illusory, drawn, impossibly real keyhole.

A mad laugh rose in his throat. He wondered if the street had gotten to him, finally pulled him under, captured his mind and turned it inside out. He hadn't started off with mental illness, as many streetfolk did, hadn't succumbed to addiction, hadn't been running from anything other than the indifferent social system.

But maybe losing her had tipped him down the rabbit hole, sent him tumbling, and the nights sleeping on concrete and the days eating binned food had closed the hole over the top of him. His gaze bounced around, half-expecting a white rabbit, a twinkling fairy, a cackling witch with a potion to kill him or cure him.

*—Don't be silly, Ben. You're not interesting enough to be crazy.*

"Evidence, item A, your honour," Ben muttered. "Subject talks to his imaginary sister."

*—I'm not imaginary. I exist, jerkface.*

"Evidence, item B. She talks back."

*—You're being a big baby. Stop crying about it and turn the key. Turn it, Ben.*

*—What's going to happen if I do?*

*—Scaredy cat.*

Ben swallowed his shaky giggles, frowning at the curious book. Was he even



sitting here, squatting in an empty house, or was he tripping under an overpass somewhere?

—*Does it matter, dummy? What do you lose if you just turn the stupid key already?*

—You don't always have to get your way, you know.

But he reached out again to the key. His muscles froze, and he sat there, holding the warming metal in his palm.

"What the fuck am I doing?" he said out loud, his voice high. "Lilly, what's happened?"

—*Come find me, Ben.*

He heard her laughter, calling from his memory, the giggles that always gave away her hiding places.

—Where are you?

—*Come find me. Turn the key.*

The whisper was fainter, pulling away. Drifting into the book.

Ben turned the key. He twisted, and it clicked, and the darkness ate him.

He expected to fall, to fall endlessly, to drift past pianos and hares and tables set for tea with jam and scones. He expected to think happy thoughts and fly off to the second star on the right, to step out of a doorway into a landscape with lollipop crops and knee-high residents.

Instead, he belly-flopped on a wooden surface. His cheek scraped the plank floor, and his arm twisted underneath him. He'd turned the key, and opened a hole, a door, a portal, and he'd gone through it. Into a metro station.

"Not exactly the height of fucking fantasy," he muttered, shoving himself to his feet.

It was empty, though he could feel trains trundling below him. Ben turned a slow circle. There were no underground metro stations in West LA, and he knew the ones closer to downtown that you could pee in for free. This was none of them.

It was a small station, with a floor that seemed to be made from cast-off lumber from an old pier. No concrete or tiles. The ceiling was close, hardly seeming high enough to permit trains. It sloped down to the walls, creating a domed tunnel, running the length of the tracks.

—*Pretty.*

—What are they?

Ben moved closer.

The texture of the ceiling and walls was not a uniform application of plaster. Ben ran his fingers over the nearest surface. It was covered in mouldings, carvings from books he'd read to Lilly. Some were expected — Winnie the Pooh, Black Beauty. Others were more prominent, however, the ones they'd truly loved — dolls with black buttons for eyes. Woolly-headed monsters. Elves with snarling teeth.

—*Gollum's over there. My precious. A giggle.*

Faint notes piped through the open space, ricocheting off the warm surfaces. Ben shifted uneasily, the tune reminding him of the ratcheting tension created by turning a Jack-in-the-box crank in slow motion.

The vibrations grew, juddering through the wood floor. A train, its front light glittering in a circle of chasing red midway lights, burst through the station. It never slowed, and the coloured bulbs dancing through its interior revealed empty cars. Except the last. Flashing past him, her small hand pressed against the glass door, her mouth moving silently, was Lilly.

"Lilly? Lilly!"

He could hear nothing from her. The train passed, Lilly with it.

Ben ran down the platform after it. "Lilly!" he shouted. The effort ripped at his throat. He looked down to the tracks, their rails reflecting the chasing lights from the retreating end of the train. He crouched on the platform's edge, ready to jump down to the tracks to follow her.

The voice stopped him. "Wouldn't do that if I were you. Not without a map, anyway."

Ben spun. "Holy crap."

The old bum shuffled over to him, crouching stiffly till he could sit on the platform, his rag-clad legs dangling. One mismatched newsprint shoe dropped to the track. He patted the pockets of the thin coat Ben had rifled through in his search for coin and sellable items.

"You still have everything I gave you, don't you?" he asked, finding a crushed and lipstick-stained cigarette butt and sticking it to the corner of his mouth. He chuckled at Ben's startled expression. "You're not that smooth a thief, kid. I was tempted to hand you a twenty for all the intimate personal contact."

Ben reached into his pockets.

"Naw. They're gifts. Keep 'em. You're gonna need 'em. I got one more for you." He pulled papers out of his shirt, one after the other. The *LA Times*, the *Santa Monica Mirror*, the *Street News*. The old man stared at each, then tossed them aside. "It's in here somewhere. Ah."

Ben took the tattered glossy foldout. Thick lines in bright colours circled and dove across the page. One bulbous dot marked a station on the blue line: Brakel Maid Station. No other stops appeared on the map.

"I don't get it," Ben said. "Where the hell am I? Is this where I'm supposed to go? 'Cause you can take a flying leap, old man, if you think I'm taking one more step down this fucking rabbit hole."

He threw the featureless map back at the bum, his fingers greasy from touching its surfaces. He rolled backward, away from the tracks, as the old man spoke again.

"How did you get here, Ben?" He didn't raise his voice, didn't move, yet his words struck Ben as strongly as if he'd still been sitting on the platform rather than running away. "You didn't walk. You didn't hail a cab. Did you buy a ticket? Take some stairs? Nope. You're here because you're trying to get somewhere you can't get to from anyplace else. No sense in running away just as you're about to get on with it."

But there were stairs. They stretched endlessly upward, to a distant horizon that had no end. Ben raced up the empty stairwell, taking two steps at a time. He was gasping for breath after a few moments, slowing down, taking the steps more slowly, but the top of the tunnel was still nowhere in sight. He stopped, his hands on his knees, and turned to look behind. The station was gone; the bottom of the tunnel was now identical to the top, the wooden staircase blurring into a soft brown line in both directions. Ben's head swirled, and he swayed, cracking his knee on the edge of the next step.

He closed his eyes, his oxygen-starved body weightless and coasting. He focused on everyday images in his mind. The Washington pier. The fish and chips shop that sometimes hired him to clean up. The urine and mould smell of underpasses. The taste of lukewarm broth and stale bread at the Santa Monica shelter, and the scores on the tabletops that he counted rather than meeting the eyes of the volunteers. The grey-green walls that amplified the cold and loneliness in the home.

The home. He'd hated that they'd called it that. They'd taken a word that meant warmth and family and belonging and safety and applied it to a location that was

nothing more than a box for lost and found items. Lilly'd been a shiny object, bound to be claimed. He'd been a broken pair of eyeglasses: useful, perhaps, not unattractive, but certainly not an item to be coveted. And they'd plucked her away, leaving him to rattle around with the other dregs.

The notebook in his pocket hung heavy against his thigh. He pressed it against his body. The notebook. The key. And a map. A map that showed him where he was, but not where he needed to go, or how to get there. He hadn't taken the map, hadn't followed the image of Lilly as it receded into the darkness.

Her sing-song voice drifted to him from one end of the tunnel. *If I were king of the forest...not queen...not duke...not prince...*

He spun toward her voice, its childish mocking. The steps pushed hard against him, but he raced downward, his speed overcoming the tunnel's dizzying motion. He'd been climbing the stairs so long, he thought he'd never have the stamina to beat them all the way to the end. But either his renewed adrenalin gave him uncommon speed, or the distance was not as great as he'd imagined, for he landed on the plank floor of the station before his legs turned to jelly.

The old man had gone. Ben could smell him under the aromas of old wood and fresh train grease, a lacing of rot, urine, and cheap peppermint. But all that was left of him was a scattering of the newspapers he'd used to insulate himself against the balmy Southern California nights, and a glossy flutter of folds perched on the middle of the platform.

A train pulled slowly in, its brakes whining softly, its carnival lights slowing to a sleepy blink. This train was also empty, but unlike the previous this train came to a halt in the cavernous station, sliding all of its doors open. It waited.

Ben ran alongside it, peering into each car, never stepping in, but looking, searching, seeking her out. Like the station, every car turned up empty. He slowed as he approached the last car, the final doorway. He saw nothing through the windows — no one sitting in any seats, no one standing, no one hanging from the rail supports. He shuffled to a stop in the doorway, his hands drifting up to prop the doors open should they suddenly decide to shut him out.

She'd been small, and could easily hide in a train car, amid the red vinyl seats and panels full of advertisements. He could step on. He could search for her. But he hesitated.

"Lilly? Lilly, are you in here?"

Nothing.

"Lilly, please," he whispered. If she was hiding, she did not answer, didn't give herself away with a giggle.

He should step inside. He knew he should look around, make sure she wasn't there before the train left the station, leaving him alone again.

The lights began to wake, their hypnotising rhythm increasing, sending shadows cavorting in a mosaic of colour patterns over the interior of the car. The train would not sit here much longer. Still, his legs refused to move over the threshold.

A rustle sounded behind him, like a pigeon catching a quick ride on a breeze. Ben glanced back to see the map fluttering up off the platform, winging its way toward him, animated and live. He ducked as it swooped over his shoulder and into the car. The map-bird flapped around the car a few times, circled, then finally glided to perch over a handrail.

Ben shouldn't have been able to see the lines on the maps, or their colours, or any details at all, in the technicolor writhing of the chasing lights. But he saw it all the same. No longer was Brakel Maid the only stop marked on the map. Another bulbous protrusion had emerged, this time on the yellow line.

He had somewhere to go. He had a vehicle, he had a map. Ben stepped forward, barely clearing the gap before the doors slammed shut, faster than any safety hydraulics should have allowed. The brakes hissed, and the train shifted, throwing him into the nearest seat. The map shook loose of its railing, drifting into his lap.

Ben clutched it, folding it back into its worn creases. As the train moved out, the lights dimmed and died, and he wrapped himself in the darkness to wait, for the next stop, for Lilly, for anything that would tip him out of the box of misplaced and unclaimed items.

## Chapter 2

### Puerta Cerrada de Unman

Note to everyone on this tiny island: I am not my mother,  
just with purple hair, black eyeliner, and striped tights.  
#getoverit

*Down the rabbit hole*

*September 22, 2012, 2:57 am*

I glanced one last time at the "No Service" indicator on my mobile.

"Fuck this," I said, backing out of the fairy circle. I called it a fairy circle like everybody else, but I never believed the spot was anything more than a bunch of stones some ancient guys had piled up and danced around, same as the village church was nothing more than a building full of people talking to an imaginary old dude with a beard.

Just as I was about to trudge down the hill to my monastic cell, my mobile vibrated. Tal.

GOT A SURPRISE FOR YOU, FLYER.

A surprise? I typed back: THOUGHT YOU WERE OFFLINE OR  
SOMETHING.

NEVER. WIRED IN, 24/7. YOU WANT YOUR SURPRISE? 'CAUSE IT'S  
GOING GOING GONE.

YOU KNOW IT.

The link popped up on my screen and I followed it.

*The Dot Matrix of Nowhere*

*June 23, 2012*

This is my grandparents' village. My village too, now, I guess.

It's there. See the specks? All 5 of them? That's it. People "live" there.

The bigger speck in the middle is the pub, where I am trapped, day and night, until either A) the nuclear power plant melts us, or B) I finally get up the gumption to leave.

This is the village where my mom grew up. The village where she grew up and then ran away from as soon as she could legally buy the tickets to get the hell out.

By 15, the only big city my mom had ever seen was Chester, that bustling metropolis of 78k people. By 15, I'd seen Mexico City, Rio. I'd climbed Machu Piccu with my parents, tagged along on my dad's photography trips down the Amazon. My dad let me smoke a cigar once in Cuba (that shit stays in your stomach for *days*), and we camped for two months in Patagonia while he read to me and Mom every night from some famous travel book.

And then they died, and I came here, and everything paused and went to grey.

There are probably islands in the South Pacific, where they worship giant stone faces and barely cover their nuts, that get better mobile coverage than this hovel in the UK.

*Another Night of Drudgery*

*September 22, 2012, 1:37 am*

I'm considering chucking my bloody mobile at the wall. It would crunch against that fucking cold Welsh bluestone, and even in a thousand electronic turds it would be as useful as it is in perfect working order.

The Carlsberg clock seems to be stuck at ten to two, over the heads of

the last bums left in the pub. I'll have to hike up to the stone circle if I want enough service to publish this post, much less talk to anyone.

"You goin' to hang about all night, lookin' sour?" My grandfather just tapped me gently between the eyes, smiling. "That mug o' yours flattens the lager."

"Nothing happening here, Taid," I reply, swiping at his nicotine-stained fingers (and keeping typing I can at least *pretend* I'm connected to the outside world).

"Nothing's happened here since your mama ran away, Amelia." He pours an umpteenth round for the craggy bastards at the end of the bar. "Ever since then, the mams and dads keep their children locked away at night

" and their secrets they whisper only to the stove in the empty first light of morning," I finish, rolling my eyes. I dump a sack of peanuts into the empty bowl. "I'm not my mom."

Gwyn Jones downs half his pint in one gurgling swallow. "Too right. Your mom were the sweetest thing ever walked the shores of Anglesey."

I grab his glass and tug it out of his reach. "Gwyn Jones, you tell me one more time how you snogged my mother in high school, and you'll not get another pull from this bar so long as I'm behind it." I mutter in my native Spanish, knowing none of them understand and my grandmother isn't here to thwack me on the back of my head.

Taid Gwion sighs. "I'm 63 years old, not 90. I don't need you here every night." He pats my cheek and kisses me on the forehead. "Go on, go wherever you go when you're ready to scream your little Latin head off, and come back fresh tomorrow. Maybe plan a weekend in the city soon, huh?"

I nod. "Thanks, Taid."

So now I'm off, up the hill, to those three precious bars of mobile service, to broadcast publishing capabilities, IMing, and Tal.

*Hasta pronto*, sheeplovers.



Step right up, folks, see the oddity that has astounded entire villages from the North Stack to the South Stack, from that old Roman brick in the ground to this one over here. Just two quid gets you five minutes to judge this freak, this human personification of just what is wrong with our children.

"What made you do that to your face?" Gwyn Jones says to me today. I kept pouring his pint, trying to figure out what was wrong with my face. "You ain't got yourself enough holes, you have to poke more, do you?"

I should know better. But instead I said, "They help me pick up the signals from my mother ship."

Like a UFO, it flew right over his head. "Your mother didn't need decorations, did she? How many you got on you, anyway, girl?" Gwyn drained his dregs, froth clinging to the stubble dirtying his droopy face. "I hear they put metal in all kinds of places the sun can't reach."

"I hear drinking kills brain cells. All three of them," I snapped, yanking his new pint away.

"Look at this, a homeless pint." Taid Gwion lifted the glass from my hand and returned it to Gwyn, telling the old git, "Last one. Bron'll be callin' for you if you don't get home soon."

I scowled at him, hoping my mascara was still black enough to make me fierce, instead of being melted halfway down my face.

Taid winked. "He's less troublesome on the soup than off."

He patted me kindly, as though I were still fifteen. Two years gone, and the only things that've changed here are the colours of my hair and the number of decorations I've managed to sneak onto my body.

Another high point. Tonight, one of the old drunks  
"mistook" me for my mother. Specifically, my ass.  
#dirtyoldperv

*The stuff that gets left behind*

*March 16, 2009*

I found a pair of my mom's old school shoes today. Maybe because they're old, maybe because they were hers, they're cool. I could probably eBay 'em for a few quid. They fit me, though.

She smiled a lot when I was little, called me Amelita, though in her Welsh accent it always sounded like a hiccup: Amel-IT!-a. She loved the Beatles and pork chops and was always trying to stick flowers in her hair.

I never met Taid and Nain while the folks were still kicking. She always said we'd visit, but we never did. And then she'd stop talking about it at all, like there was something bad waiting for her in Wales.

There's nothing bad here. There's nothing.

*Down down the rabbit hole*

*September 22, 2012, 2:57 am*

The link popped up on my screen and I followed it.

I frowned, squinting at the tiny URL. What came up was a Google Earth image, zoomed in tight.

KNOW WHAT THIS IS?

LOOKS LIKE A GOOGLE EARTH MAP OR SOMETHING.

IT'S YOU, ROCKSTAR. SEE THOSE WHITE DOTS?

YEAH.

LOOK LIKE STONES TO YOU?

They were only a few pixels, floating out of the dark screen like fireflies. But they were in a rough circle, the oblong bench stone dotting the centre.

**SIT DOWN. ON THE BENCH.**

Slowly, I moved back to the centre of the circle. You play around on these things, looking up your house, your ex-boyfriend's house, that house where the kid drew a big penis on his roof. You play, and you think you should be seeing things as they are right now, your neighbour's car parked crooked, your wheelie bin overturned. But you look closer, and you see differences. That shed you painted last summer is still dingy and old-looking. There's a car there, but it's the one that got wrecked in the "tree incident" two months ago.

But this time, I do see something. The blob in the middle of the pixel stone circle flickers as a shadow crawls across it, and I realise that shadow is me. I'm not going to stand out in the nighttime scene, what with all the black clothing. I'm more like a black hole, visible because of the light I hide.

"Holy shit!" I say to the screen, and then I type it.

**MAD CRAZY, AIN'T IT?**

**THIS ISN'T GOOGLE EARTH. IT'S REAL TIME. WHAT'D YOU DO, HACK SOME MI6 SAT?**

**MI6 DOESN'T HAVE THE FUNDING FOR SOMETHING THIS RAD. ARE YOU READY FOR THE TRUE MIND-FUCK?**

**THERE'S MORE?**

**THIS IS JUST A MAP, KID. MAPS'RE NOTHING WITHOUT A DESTINATION.**

Underneath the message, a red dot appeared over one of the standing stones. I oriented myself until I was facing the massive chunk. On my mobile screen, it was outlined in red. In real life, blue light was fading up on the stone, like a TV warming up.

The mobile dinged, and I glanced at it.

**DOORS ARE MEANT TO BE OPENED.**

The blue was coalescing on the stone, neon embedded in the ancient surface, glowing brighter in the spots where prehistoric delinquents and more than a few modern ones had etched drawings and shapes onto the surface. I'd stepped right in the middle of a Doctor Who episode.

I reached out to touch the screen. It had to be a screen, embedded in some kind of stage stone made from styrofoam, a pretender that would be obvious in the light of day. I waited for the slick warmth of plastic to slide through my fingertips, for icons to appear, for a virtual desktop to tell me what to do.

But the screen was rough, the grit scraping into my nails. Breathing short little gasps, I shoved my mobile in my pocket and pressed both palms to the surface. It was cold, damp, and when I leaned into it I could smell the moss and dirt that had lived on it for longer than my grandparents' village had existed. Nothing save the blue light spilling over my hands belied the presentation of a giant stone.

It shifted, and I yelped. I jammed a fist to my mouth, embarrassed at my own girlish noise. A rectangle had opened in the stone, the azure outline of a door.

**DOORS ARE MEANT TO BE OPENED.**

"Fuck me with a magic wand," I whispered. I thought of the missionaries who came into the pub every summer, who told me it was okay that I didn't believe in God (lying, clearly), because he believed in me. Apparently the same went for magic, too.

I backed away from the doorway. Behind the stone, down the hill and under the mist, slept my grandparents, the pub, the village. If I stepped through that blue doorway, would I return? Would I disappear, like my mother had thirty years earlier, only to feel the sadness creep into me every time I thought of home? Or was I even now walking through a dream that would leave me broken and depressed on awakening and discovering I was right about magic after all?

I squeezed the mobile phone in my pocket. Tal had offered nothing more. He would not cajole me, would not beg me, would not turn into some educational TV movie about peer pressure. But he'd offered the door.

Doors aren't only meant to be opened. They're meant to provide

passage. So I passed.

I dig the lurk, to swim in the slang & the typos & the pop culture references. They make me feel like Marty McFly.

*Romance and Other B.S.*

*February 10, 2012*

I met someone.

Talk about a fucking cliché. Especially when it's so pathetic. I mean, "meeting" implies flesh, right. Being able to hear their voice, get some clues about how much they're lying. Whether they have an excruciating laugh. You don't get that when your only knowledge of the person is what they publish online. Publish — that's the word for it. Composing, drafting, reviewing, editing, *crafting* who they are before they hit enter.

I was lurking in a craigslist women's forum when I first saw him. Tal was trolling — not your standard sexist taunts, either. He knew each and every handle, knew their history, knew when to call them on their bullshit, to trot out their hypocrisies. In the space of an hour he'd enraged no less than five posters to scream at him in all caps and storm out of the fo in a text-based tantrum.

Then I got an email. From him, asking me over to a "secret forum." Which was weird, because I don't actually post all that often — I lurk, and I laugh, but I'm not about to dip my toe into that pool of piranhas. And because the secret fos are generally full of whiners and pouters who can't hack it in the public fos, or asshats who got banned. They're not even that secret anyway.

But it's like being the quiet girl in the corner at a raging party. Nobody ever notices you, and you keep sitting there, hoping that by some sort of

magic some Romeo's going to see how beautiful you are, even though you're buried and antisocial and intimidating. And you go home most nights alone, having only used your voice to order drinks or to say "No, that seat's not taken. Go ahead."

But he noticed me, so I went. To the secret fo.

And no, I won't give you the URL.

*Macrowhining*

*September 22, 2012, 2:13 am*

He's not replying. He always replies. But tonight, with a wet fog slithering through the stones that in no way resemble fairies, I can't raise him anywhere. I've never not found him online, no matter what time it was anywhere in the world he might live.

No reply has come yet, though. His log-in name is greyed out, which means he's offline, or that he's made himself invisible. He could be sitting there in front of his machine, reading my messages, rolling his eyes at me, clicking them closed as soon as they popped up.

Tears burn my eyes. I blink.

Really? I'm this pathetic? Crying over a friend who exists only in 1s and 0s?

Apparently I am. I'm sitting on the fallen stone in the middle of the fairy circle, writing this post, making it way too long in the hope he's only in the bathroom, or attending to some other physical need I never imagined he had. Waiting.

The stones peer sadly at me, stretching their shadows to blanket me. They're nothing compared to Stonehenge in the south, but neither are they the tiny little rocks used to form most of the fairy circles in the region. This standing circle took some serious theological freaks to build. The mist is too heavy to inch its way up the hill, and above the stones hangs a rare clear

night. The moon is absent, letting the stars preen in the black. I stare up at them, waiting for them all to fall at once, lighting the sky on fire, exploding through the atmosphere and wiping us all out like the soft sacks of water we are.

I'm sending one last message. Come on, Tal. Please don't leave me dangling here.

Today's lead, if our podunk village had a rag: "Teens with Tattoos—Is the UK Crumbling into Anarchy?" New tat not popular w/the folks. :(

*Let's open old wounds, shall we?*

*June 16, 2012*

Tal asked me something about my parents today, and I got all 2.0 and told him to just read about it on my blog. Everything's on here, right? I mean, I'm not so painfully honest that I put my menstrual calendar on here (F that), but I'm not really a secret-keeper.

Except it wasn't here. I looked and searched and thought surely it must be here. I even sent a nasty email to Blogger about lost posts (sorry, Blogger, not your fault after all). Turns out I never sent it into the cloud.

I guess I didn't want to tell the story again. I never want to tell the story again. Why do people always want to know? Does it matter to our relationship that they know how I became a fucking orphan? Will they like me more or less if they find out my parents were eaten by mutant iguanas?

It was a car wreck. I wasn't there. I don't know the gory details. I wasn't old enough to identify the bodies, and my parents weren't into gawk-at-the-corpse funerals. I never saw them dead.

The news media told me what the news media thought happened. Taid

tried to keep me from reading them, but Taid doesn't know much about the www. The weak 3-paragraph articles, one the day after, and one when the police report came out, said they lost control on a wet road, hit a guard rail in a weak spot, tumbled about 30 feet, and hit a tree. No explosions. No bad guy on their tail. Was Dad drunk? they wondered. Were they fighting? Was he on meds or had he just found out about my mom's torrid affairs with other tall dark and Latin men besides himself?

I used to get angry reading this stuff. Used to scream bloody murder at the boys in the village when they assumed there had to be some big fucking story behind it, that my parents were like TV couples, just sacks of shit and bile who once, a long time ago, had a crazy, bitch-ass day and said some offhanded vows. Because they weren't. They fought and nagged and snapped at each other, but they loved each other.

It was just an accident. Maybe Dad reached too far to change the radio, took his eyes off the road, his hand slipped on the wheel. Maybe Mom poked him in the ribs like she always did when he was being cheeky, and he flinched. A flinch could do it. A flinch at 50 m.p.h. at the wrong spot in the road can kill you. Death has played crazier tricks.

Q: If no motorway, FIOS or random royal personage zooms through a village in rural Wales, does it ever exist at all? A: Do sheep count?

*Nowhere...Anywhere...Everywhere but Somewhere*

*August 5, 2008*

Last year at this time, I was at the Feira do Rio Antigo, by myself, wandering through the stalls, paying for what I felt like, nicking what I didn't (they expect it. Right?). I was hot, and the tourists were swarming like



maggots on shit, and my parents were fighting (again). I didn't even know I was happy, but I was. Fuck.

Did you know the Welsh word for "nowhere" is the same as the word for "anywhere"? *Unman*. Anywhere in Wales is nowhere at all. And where I'm stuck is more nowhere than anywhere else. I have to go to the library for dialup, when old Mother Jones can be bothered to open the book shack.

Dial. Up.

I asked my grandparents for a smart phone for my birthday, and they got me one of those translucent phones that seemed cool when you were 5 and had just graduated from plastic chew toys.

It's only 3 years. Three years, and I'm officially grown up, and I can leave, go back home, or anywhere, really.

Shit. I'm stuck here for 3 years.

*Down down down the rabbit hole*

*September 22, 2012, 2:57 am*

Doors aren't only meant to be opened. They're meant to provide passage. So I passed.

I passed through the doorway, into the blue stairwell spiralling down, so deep and so far it seemed to stretch beneath the world. And then it moved.

The steps spun downward. I thought I was going to hurl, crouching and gripping the riser beneath my feet like a surfer riding a drill to the core of the planet (talk about a shitty film — Michael Bay would probably take it on). The step was cold and rough on my fingers, though it made no sound as it scraped around the inside of the tunnel.

And then, as the escalator to hell slowed, I did hear something. I stumbled out of the stairwell to a rocking rush of steel on steel, forced air in a narrow space, and a posh electronic female reminding me to "mind the gap."

A metro station. Under a pasture next to a village whose sheep

outnumbered its humans.

Fuck me, indeed.

I'd never seen a station like this — if it really existed, it wouldn't last long. It did not resemble the stations I'd used in big cities around the world, which were often just ballooned openings along the arteries of the metro lines. Rather, it was a maze of screens, flickering and loading, flashing their advertisements, scrolling through texts, reeling through vids and clips. Walking through it, I found occasional cul-de-sacs that led to the tracks, openings just wide enough to permit the train doors to open and allow theoretical people on and off.

I reached out to a screen, and at my touch it blanked out. Text appeared under my fingers.

**COME FIND ME, FLYER.**

"Tal?" I whispered.

Another line merged into the first.

**COME FIND YOU.**

"Are you here?"

A train slammed through the station, never slowing down, washing me with hot gusts of stale tunnel air. The confines of the screens only allowed me to see a moving picture of the train through the nearest access space, and I stared through the empty vehicle to the other side of the station, its seats empty, its cars containing nothing more than potential.

I stepped away, my eyes dropping to the screen, where Tal's words were fading. One last line had scrolled up as I watched the train, and I frowned.

**COME FIND US.**

And there he was, in the last car, the car's potential fulfilled to the number of one. I ran to the edge of the platform. He receded into the tunnel, drawn away to a far off capillary I might never know the location of. But he saw me, caught my eye before the distance grew too great.

My mobile vibrated, and I jumped. I'd forgotten it there in my hand,

and as it came to life it felt as though something were trying to eat through my flesh, straight to the bone. I glanced at the screen.

A new icon had appeared, resembling the old tombstone-shaped road markers carved with the name of the next village and how many miles away. The icon was tiny, the font even smaller, but I could just make out the place name: Færwhile. Distance: 0. I tapped it.

A map opened. Not the satellite map Tal had shown me, but a metro map. The stations were sparse: in this system, it seemed, the trains blasted round and round through tunnel after tunnel, with no stations to let anyone on or off, save this one and a terminus, where all lines converged.

Another train pulled into the station, this one drawing to a sighing stop.

I gave no thought to my grandparents as they slept in their bed above the ground and in the world. I crossed the gap and let the unseen conductor carry me further into the dark, following Tal. Following him to where I sit now, posting to a blog whose server is, for all I know, in another universe by now.

**COME FIND US.**

## Chapter 3

### Awake the Mighty Dread

Once upon a space of time, a young girl set off on a journey.

Hmm. That's not quite right. Better to say the young girl was set upon a journey, by way of being lost. For if you are lost, you must travel somewhere, otherwise you will never be found.

Her name was Lilly, and she was quite small for her age, though no one had ever mentioned that to her. She was certainly old enough to walk to school by herself, and to take her allowance to the market on the corner to purchase candies and ice creams. Her foster mother had shown her a map printed from [sexualpredators.com](http://sexualpredators.com), so she would know where all the bad men lived, and dash quickly past their apartment buildings.

Lilly did not know just how she had become lost, though she was not frightened at all. It felt as if she had been here before. She hadn't been here before, that she knew of, but it felt that way anyway. Any moment she expected to see something familiar rush by outside the windows of the train. Nothing did, however, just the flickering black of the endless tunnel, and the rolling clack-clackety-clack of the rails.

So she walked up and down the train, which took all of twenty seconds — there were only two cars on the whole train, and neither contained an engineer or another passenger. It was as though she were in the belly of a dragon, snaking its way into its lair deep in the crevices of the earth. They would dive and dive and dive, farther and farther into the core, until the blackness outside gave way to writhing red magma, turning the comfortable train cars into saunas of dripping metal. They would get through it, just barely, before Lilly's body combusted into millions of tiny chunks of flaming flesh, and through to the cavernous worlds within, where lost World War II pilots had established a colony after disappearing beneath the surface of the planet through a little-known hole in the crust in the Arctic Circle.

These were the thoughts in Lilly's mind as the train chugged forever onward — onward, but definitely not down into the Earth's core. Instead, the train burst rather suddenly out of its underground tunnel and into sunshine, golden rays setting the dust

motes in the train cars alight. Lilly squinted out the windows, her eyes tearing from the sudden light.

The land stretched out before her, the raised train tracks giving her a good view of the surrounds. To her left was a wood, tendrils of smoke rising from its depths, thatched roofs peaking here and there. She glimpsed a large man wielding a similarly large axe against a truly large tree, a stack of felled logs reclining in his wake. Upon one of them sat a small girl with a red hat, swinging her legs and arranging a bunch of wildflowers.

Lilly blinked and the little red-hatted girl was gone, obscured by trees, trees, and more trees. She stepped to the right side of the train, her eye drawn far, far away to the outline of a cityscape. Its skyscrapers rose like crystals, sparking in geode colours from the top of a small rise. Small bright shapes darted like fireflies over and around the city, though in somewhat more organised lines and patterns.

The city slowly drew away from sight, replaced by a desert that seemed largely populated by eagles and snakes and tall cacti that served as homes to both. The desert grew until it circled the train, and the warmth of the sun streaming through the windows became a slicing heat. Lilly curled into a corner, away from the sun, and her eyelids began to droop.

*...The house smelled sweet and salty, like sweaty feet or heavily buttered popcorn. It always smelled like that, and Lilly had begun to wonder if she now smelled like feet as well. It must come from feet, for her foster mother never made them popcorn, not even when they were exceptionally good. It wasn't that she was mean or cruel or neglectful. It was just that she didn't make popcorn.*

*Lilly could hear Rob turning in his bed, and she grew as still as she could lest she wake him. There were four of them in the room: Lilly, tiny little pug-nosed Mandy, Tonio who never spoke a word. And Rob.*

*Lilly had told her foster mother once about Rob, but Rob made good grades, and smiled, and did his chores on time, and never talked back the way Lilly sometimes did. She'd been given a very firm talk about the consequences of fibbing, and assigned extra dishwashing duties that week.*

*Lying still in the stuffy room, trying not to breathe, Lilly prayed. Not to any god, despite her foster mother's insistence on Sunday school. If asked, she would have said that she believed in some sort of god, but on nights when she felt alone and sad, she did not think to send her thoughts to someone she had never met and who would*

*never speak back to her. She sent her thoughts to Ben instead, and imagined what he would say. She surrounded her body not with the shared bedroom and second-hand mattresses, but with the stories Ben would read to her. With Ben, they were never orphans. They were adventurers. They were characters in a fairy tale, battling against the cruelties of a world full of monsters. They were free, traveling...*

...waking in unknown places. The train entered another tunnel. This one did not go into the deep dark depths of the Earth, either, but it was quite black, which must have been the reason for all the lights to come on. They blinded her as she woke, their round bulbs reminding her of nights on Santa Monica pier, dinners of hot dogs and funnel cakes salvaged from bins, and Ben talking the carnies into letting his poor "dying" sister ride for free.

The train emerged into a station that bubbled and swam in the glow of the train's carnival lights. Lilly pressed her nose to the window, knowing no one was around to shout at her for leaving nose-prints on the glass, and peered into the rainbow-glittered station. A dark man stood on the platform, staring at the train, his coat flapping around his legs.

Yet it wasn't a man. He was simply tall. Taller than he had been when she'd seen him last, his hair longer and dirtier, his face less likely to break into a smile.

"Ben!" Lilly called his name and pounded her palms against the plexiglass. She stepped back, seeking a stop button or a brake cord. She mashed every protuberance in sight, but the train barrelled on, back into the tunnel, away from the station. Away from Ben.

The train's lights dwindled and faded out as the tracks led it once again through a wooded landscape. Lilly pushed at the doors, her tiny arms as effective as noodles. She screamed, and though she would have protested its occurrence, she cried, tears settling into the collar of her shirt. Perhaps someone heard, perhaps someone woke up and stopped her train one stop too far, or perhaps we are merely bored of her ongoing journey, for after a few moments the train slowed and settled to rest at a quiet platform of iron grates and brass doors blanketed in steam. The doors slid sheepishly open.

Gas lamps glowed through the murk. She could see no people, but surely a platform that looked like the inside of an old watch couldn't be far from a town of some sort, somewhere she could get help.

She stepped off the train, and the doors immediately shut behind her. The train pulled away, pumping more steam onto the platform, though the train had not been a

steam engine prior to arriving at this station. Lilly felt cold and small out in the open, without the now-familiar cars to insulate her from the worlds she'd observed out the windows.

The steam cleared, and she huffed a sigh of relief. A city rose behind the station, and the non-specific swarm of movement within told her it was not abandoned. She sought out someone official, someone with a uniform, to tell her how and when to catch the next train going the opposite direction and back to her brother Ben.

Down the stairs and under the raised track sat a small information hut, its glass front shuttered. Lilly knocked softly.

"Hello?" she called. "Is anyone working here? Please?"

No one responded to her cries. The station was silent, save the creaks and groans of the platform weathering the wind. Behind her, the station emptied into a broad gravel street, worn away to hard-packed earth in the centre by an intermittent stream of vehicles. They pumped and churned, gears grinding, as they motored down the street, like huge wind-up toys. Their distant noise, the chaos of movement that did not seem governed by any traffic law she could determine, rose at her like a monstrous wall.

Lilly sat down, her back against the information hut, and dropped her head to her knees. She hadn't cried in a very long time (even now she won't admit to her tears on the train); Ben never had, and she had never wanted to let him down. But she felt a small sob rise through her chest.

*Rib-click!*

She started at the small noise behind her. There was still no one about, but she was certain she'd heard something.

*Rib-click!*

It was definitely there, muffled and faint, coming from inside the information hut. Lilly stood up and tried the door, expecting it to be locked. It was not.

The inside of the hut was mostly dark. The city light spilling around her through the doorway revealed a small desk holding something that looked like a calculator had mated with a typewriter, along with a sheaf of leaflets she took to be train schedules. The hut contained no chair for employees to rest upon, which Lilly thought was rather cruel.

"*Rib-click!*"

"Hello?" Lilly said softly. She took a step into the room, and her shadow

shifted away from the far corner. A small object gleamed in the new light. And then it moved.

"Rib-HELLO!" The object leaped toward her, and Lilly jumped back through the door. "Yes! I finally — *rib!* — can speak! *Rib*. Sort of. Needed a bit of a *rib*-reminder, you see. Oh, please don't go. I didn't mean to *rib*-frighten you."

Lilly could not take her eyes from the palm-sized frog — make that frog-robot — hopping determinedly toward her. She stepped backward again, only this time her shoe caught and she sat hard on the ground, thumping her tailbone.

The robot-frog advanced upon her, settling between her splayed ankles. "Please don't go. I've been very lonely." He hiccuped, and Lilly thought there might be tears, if he was capable of shedding them. She wondered if she would be forced to oil him so he could move again.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Are you lost?"

"No," he sighed. "I know where I am. Do you?"

Lilly shook her head. "I'm trying to find my brother. I saw him, at a train station, but the train didn't stop, and I haven't seen any going the other direction—"

"They never go the other direction," he stated. "Or any direction. They just go."

Lilly frowned. "But I really have to find Ben. I'm lost, and he was always better at finding safe places."

"Hmm. You're lost, and I'm not. The only place either of us will get any help is at the palace. *You*—" he waved a forelimb in her general direction "—could get in there. If you take me with you, I'll tell you how to get there."

"The palace?" Lilly stared into the depths of the city. It didn't seem like the sort of city that would have a palace. It seemed like the sort of city that would have day spas and robot wars, all in the same venue.

The robot-frog hopped a bit closer to her. "Sure, the palace. It's grand, you'll see. None of this brass-plating bologna. It's just there, see?" He threw one mechanically jointed frog leg up in the air, attempting to point.

"Oh." The palace hung high in the air, a mile above the city, a floating estate that resembled a small, and very brassy, city in its own right. It was suspended under what she initially took to be a cloud, but then realised was an enormous balloon. That didn't seem very safe.

Lilly shook her head. "I don't think that's the best idea. Ben and I once got



thrown out of a McDonald's. If I try to get into a palace, they'll probably want to behead me."

The robot-frog spoke quickly, but didn't look her in the eye. "Oh, no one goes in for that sort of wet stuff here anymore. They'll be so excited — it's not every day a softbody comes to visit."

"Softbody?"

"Well, you're not a robot, are you?"

"Not today," Lilly mused. "How do we get to this palace?"

"I know the way." He stuck out one foreleg. "I'm Prince Hal."

"Lilly." Lilly held out her pinky, frowning as it touched — or didn't touch — Hal's leg. She could only feel the barest of whispers from his clockwork limb, rather than the cold scratch of metal she'd expected. The little frog did not seem to notice. "If you're the prince, why aren't you already in the palace?"

Hal retracted his limb, his bright blue eyes tracking around the hut. "Oh, it's been terrible. A mad inventor kidnapped me and trapped me in this tiny robot body. I didn't even do anything to him, and look what he did to me! I only want to get home so my mother and father can restore me."

"Uh-huh," Lilly said. She eyed him, and he eyed her warily back. He sniffed once for effect.

"You'll never make it to the palace without me," he warned.

"No?"

"Never."

Lilly sighed and lay out her hand for him to hop onto it. He hopped squarely into her palm...and just sort of sank slowly through it and back down again, as though drifting through marshmallow cream.

"You can't *drop* me," Hal whined, craning his neck to check for damage on his underside.

"I didn't." Lilly stared at her hand. She had touched the door, and sat on the train, and sat against the wall of the information hut. She had not been a marshmallow being then. Leaning over, she poked a finger against the hut's open door. It swung easily, with just the right amount of resistance.

"I'll try again," she said, this time reaching to pick Hal up herself. Her tongue poked out in concentration as she felt her fingertips squishing through his solid brass skin. Slowly, as though she were plucking a troublesome jellyfish from a tank, she

lifted the frog from the ground.

"Is this safe?" Hal's voice was squeaky, and his limbs swam in the air.

I hope so, Lilly thought, trying not to lose her concentration. She slipped him in the front pocket of her skirt, which was a great deal more solid than the rest of her seemed to be, and breathed a sigh of relief when he didn't drop straight through to the ground again. She pulled the door to the information hut closed, and set off into the gear-works of the city, squeezing her hands into fists every few moments just to be sure they were still there.

The station emptied into a broad gravel street, worn away to hard-packed earth in the centre. The vehicles sputtered as they motored down the street, gears grinding like huge wind-up toys. Lilly kept to the edge of the street, fearing a stray piston might take an eye out. She didn't see any other softbodies like herself wandering around — just brass and steel, oil and steam. It was as though all the boys in her third grade classroom had pooled their action figures and Legomen and robots and Hotwheels and Transformers, mixing and matching parts with reckless glee.

Hal chattered to her from his perch in her pocket, telling her about the city. Mostly he pointed out places he had visited in spite of — or more likely because of — his father's having forbidden them. As they moved deeper into the city centre, Lilly passed fewer vehicles, and the pedestrians became thicker and thicker, until she could not help but brush against them as she passed. Their mechanical skins chilled her, lacking body warmth, softness, connectivity. But then, maybe it wasn't them at all.

It's me who's cold, she thought. Am I dead? Is this crazy girl heaven?

"Who's dead?" Hal asked, interrupting his own tale of dashing and daring.

"What? Nobody." Crazy was right.

"Were you even listening to me? It's a very important story, you know." If he could have crossed his arms and pouted, he would have, she could see. Instead, he settled for dropping himself down in her pocket, with only his green LED eyes shining up out of it.

"I'm very sorry," Lilly told him, as familiar with the chanted apology as any child of her age. Another robot — should she be thinking of them as people? persons? — brushed against her, the tip of one of his five spidery arms sludging right through her shoulder. It hurt a little, and this made her feel somewhat better; pain meant she was alive.

"Is something going on here?" she asked. "Why are there so many... why is it

so crowded?"

He frowned. "I don't know. It's not a Maintenance or a Reset Day. These people should be at work. It's never like this."

Lilly felt more brushes, invasions into her semi-permeable skin. The crowd was crushing her, would crush her. Their metal bodies would gloop through her back and her stomach and her bones, and even though nothing had harmed her so far, she could see herself finally bursting under the pressure. Her strangely ethereal body would bulge and squeeze like a half-filled water balloon, then pop with a weak gush of thick pink blood.

"Oh." Hal, who had ducked down in the pocket in fright, slowly pushed his triangular head back out. "Oh, I see. I'm sorry, Lilly. I should have warned you. I think it's this mini-processor; I can't hold more than one thing in my head at a time, it seems."

Lilly strained to get the words out, panting in fear even while her chest felt deadened by the increasing contact. "Warned me about what?"

"You're flesh," Hal stated simply. "The last softbody anybody ever saw around here was...I don't think anyone's ever seen one before. There are quite a number of factions who theorise there never were any softbodies, that we were never human, like you."

"What are they going to do to me?"

"I don't know," Hal said thoughtfully. "Generally, whenever Babbingenians encounter something unknown, they take it apart to see how it works."

"I don't want to be taken apart!" Lilly pushed hands and wheels and pinchers away, fighting off the urge to scream. She wished she were back on the train, bored and hungry and alone. Mostly, the alone part. More people were gathering, pressing through the crowd that was already pressing on her. She could not read their moulded expressions, could not see if they were gnashing their teeth, eager to brandish screwdrivers and drills and jigsaws at her fragile body, or if they were simply welcoming her into their tribe through a ritual of inappropriate groping.

A roaring noise sounded overhead, and Lilly ducked, expecting a giant robot to breathe flames at her. Her skin, however, did not melt, and her hair went unsinged. A space opened around her as the robots retreated from whatever monster was descending. Not a large space — about the size of her bedroom back home ("*home?*") *Where was that? The word had come to her, the image rising in her brain, but she*

*could not remember exactly where or what it was.*)

Lilly peeked upward. A large wicker basket blotted out most of the sky. It was connected to a hot air balloon, its envelope camouflaged in blue and white against the sky.

"Need a lift?" asked a very scratchy voice from the basket. She lowered her gaze to see the Egyptian god Ra. That couldn't be right.

"Who are you?" Hal asked, poking his head out of her pocket. "That's Manny's balloon."

"Manny took a maintenance day. You comin' or what?"

Lilly did not move. Now that her head was not reeling from the pressure of the crowd, she could see the robot was not a member of the Egyptian pantheon, though her mistake was understandable. He was formed from some sort of black metal, like a dark knight. His torso and arms were human-shaped, but his legs resembled the rear limbs of a dog or a wolf. Their origins were reflected in his head, which formed a long snout and pointed ears, which belied their canine shape in being able to rotate 360 degrees.

"Gettin' warm up in that sky," he commented. "Balloon won't be able to take off if you sit here pickin' your nose much longer."

The pilot was most certainly not a gentle old man who'd faked telling her her fortune, nor hidden behind a curtain making terrible threats. Her house had not fallen on a witch, and her shoes were neither ruby nor slippers, but Lilly felt an urge to click her heels together and chant something about home.

*Home.* The word echoed in her mind, bouncing around her skull until it had no meaning whatsoever, if it ever had. What was home?

"Let's get on with it, then," she said, clambering into the basket.

The pilot raised copper eyebrows at her. "Well, all right then," he said, approving. He reached up to fire the burner, and the balloon began to creak up and into the sky.

"Ain't from here, are ya?" the pilot asked her idly.

"No," she replied, peering up. She could see nothing but sky, sky and the globe of the balloon. "I just got here, and I'm trying to find my brother."

"Your brother's here too? I ain't heard tell of no other softbodies around."

"That's because there aren't any," Hal said, sniffing. "She's the only one, and she's with me."

"Is she now?" The pilot nodded. "All I know is, if'n I was looking for another

softbody, I'd be getting out of Babbingen, seeing as how there ain't any here nohow."

"But how?" Lilly asked. "I saw him from the train, but it wouldn't stop. And when I got here, no more trains came through."

"Oh, the train don't stop here less'n it wants to. Most times, it don't even pass by here." The tall robot shrugged. "There's other ways to travel."

"Like what?"

His hinged jaw cocked in something that might have been a smile, and might have been a hungry pant. Lilly chose to believe it was a smile. He tipped his head up, and Lilly found her eyes following his.

The balloon floated above them, bolstered by the pilot's frequent blasts of fire into its belly. But instead of the unbroken sky beyond it, a massive structure hovered over them. It dropped slowly over their heads, and Lilly's muscles tensed to duck, to keep it from crushing down on them, before she realised the motion was theirs.

"Is that the palace?" she asked.

"Sure," Hal said. "Someday, it will all be mine. I want to put on an addition, maybe some turrets. Turrets would be nice, don't you think? Excellent for hide-and-seek."

Lilly couldn't picture turrets on the structure. From below, it looked like the inner workings of a planet-sized clock. She remembered a clock like that — not that big, of course, but much much bigger than herself... *Three foster homes ago, the one where she and Ben got placed together, there'd been a grandfather clock in the front hall. It didn't work, and sometimes she hid in there when her foster father was home. She'd been afraid of him, afraid of his fists and the smell of whiskey, just like she was afraid of Rob now. She clutched a handful of blanket and squeezed her eyes shut...*

Lilly's eyes fluttered open, her vision fuzzy, to find the pilot eyeing her.

"Nobody says you got to go see this king," he began.

"Of course she does," Hal said.

"Nobody says you got to do nothing," the pilot continued. "This balloon'll go sideways same as it goes up. Just point me in a direction."

Hal gasped. "Traitor! You are a servant to the king. You can't just hightail it in a royal conveyance—"

"What do you say, Lilly? You c'n take your friend here along if you want, long's you make some effort to shut him up. I hear frogs like mud."

Hal gulped. "Mud? In my joints and gears?"

The pilot shrugged.

Lilly peered at the palace foundation above them, then at the surrounding area. She could see all of Babbingen, from the massive chrome dome down the central street, all the way to the rail station. The train tracks snaked away, and farther out lay pockets of woodland, villages, desert — every nick on the horizon a possibility. It would be far easier to search for Ben from the air, floating low enough to shout to people to ask if they'd seen a tall boy with dirty hair and a scowl. The balloon, unlike the train, could fly where she liked, and she could get off as soon as she found Ben.

A vibration in her pocket drew her attention. She looked down to find the little robot frog trembling violently.

"What's the matter?" she asked him quietly.

"I'm frightened," he replied. "I've never been anywhere else. I don't want to be a frog forever, and only the king and queen can give me my prince body back."

Lilly gently wrapped her hand around him, pulling him out of her pocket. She held him close to her chest. He was stuck-up and seemed to care about no one further than his own nose, but she couldn't simply kidnap him. And she believed (mostly) that he was genuinely scared.

She eyed the darkening, brass-filled sky above them once again. "I think..." she murmured, "I think maybe we'd better go ahead to the palace. Maybe the king can help."

The pilot reached up to the burner. "Your choice," he said without inflection.

The balloon rose, rose, rose some more, into the belly of the beast. The burner roared again, its noise echoing around the solid brass chamber that surrounded them.

"NO!" Hal cried over the din. "We were supposed to use the servants' entrance."

"Not much I can do about it now, bud." The pilot didn't even look down at the trembling frog.

The chamber pressed in on them, closer and closer, and Lilly worried the balloon was too big. They'd float up into the narrowing tube, and the balloon's envelope would wedge in like a big stopper, and they would be stuck, dangling there like fish bait. No one even knew they were coming; no one would look for them, and they would die here. She would be first, for her body required food and water, but eventually the robots would run low on energy, rust and shut down.

But the balloon did not get stuck, even if it could have. The envelope brushed

the chamber's wall once with a soft hiss of silk, but the pilot made a gentle correction and within moments they bobbed up onto a wide platform.

The platform was a broad, open expanse that offset the enormous palace like a plain before a mountain. The palace, small in the distance, resembled a doll's house built by Thomas Edison, and then renovated and added onto by a hundred generations of steam engineers and crackpot inventors.

Lilly only had a moment to gawk at it, however, as the pilot plunked the basket down, and hundreds of assembled people fell silent at their appearance.

"Who gave you permission to land?" boomed a voice over the crowd. Lilly half-expected to see a great and terrible wizard face scowling over them. Instead, she saw the king standing on a stage, their balloon and the chamber they'd flown through separating him from his subjects. They'd floated right up into a royal address.

The king was not a large robot, as Lilly had expected. He was very slender, sleek, efficient, and his metal skin had a dark iridescent sheen, like a black knight under a black light. His face was nearly featureless, a sleek chess piece, masculine and hard.

"Just delivering a package, majesty." The pilot leaned back against the side of the wicker basket, crossing his ankles in a very unrobot-like fashion. "If'n you want to refuse delivery, I can take the softbody back to Babbingen Below—"

"Softbody? Where?" Another voice, this one high and fluted. The king's head spun around, and on its backside was not the back of his head at all, but rather the front of the queen's face. It was just as featureless, and if anything it was harder, fiercer. Its surface shimmered like mother-of-pearl.

The pilot waved a hand at Lilly, and Lilly stepped forward. She could no longer tell the difference between Hal's shivering and her own, so she pressed the frog close to her chest to comfort them both.

A soft "ooh" went through the crowd, and the queen eagerly stepped forward, reaching out one arm that ended in a grasper claw.

"Appeal to my father," Hal whispered. "My father, not my mother. Never my mother."

Lilly looked up at the pilot, who was expressionless. She wondered if he was mad she hadn't hired him to fly her away. Or maybe he knew something she didn't.

"Your majesty — sir," Lilly called out. "I came to see if you could help me."

The head spun again, but this time only halfway, oscillating gently between the two faces. "Come forward, softbody, if true softbody you be," answered the king.

Lilly clambered out of the basket on the side closest to the king — and away from the queen. Hal's shaking decreased a notch.

"She's so young," the queen murmured, briefly eyeing Lilly before her face swung away again.

Lilly edged away from her and addressed the king. "I'm lost, your majesty. Well, not really lost, but I don't know where I am, and my brother is also not lost, but I don't know where he is either. I—" She faltered, knowing her explanation was very far from explaining anything. "It's just that I wish we were both lost in the same place."

The king leaned over and peered at her. She assumed he was peering at her — perhaps he was scanning her, or sniffing her. She couldn't really place his orifices.

"And may I ask what makes you think I can do anything about that?" he said, his voice pounding her ears. He was still speaking loudly enough so that the last citizen at the very back of the crowd could hear him, though she was only a few feet away.

"Well, I was told—"

"Who told you?"

"Who? Oh, I..."

A *Ribbit!* emerged from her hand, a pathetic nervous hiccup. Oh no.

"What was that?" the queen shrieked, head spinning. "Show us what's in your hand!"

Lilly dropped her hand, but a series of miserable *Ribbits* erupted, and she was forced to display the cringing frog to his parents.

"Henry!" the king bellowed. "You are fully aware—"

"You sneaky little miscreant!" the queen shrieked, her face overwhelming that of her husband's. Lilly felt the crowd flinch behind her. "You were forbidden to return to this palace until you had paid off your debts for what you destroyed."

She would have gone on, and might have even sprung off the stage to snatch Hal — who could only manage a squeaky croak at this point — from Lilly's palm, but the king stopped her. With what seemed like great effort, the head twisted with a metallic screech.

"Henry," he said, more calmly. "Are you ready to pay for what you've done?"

Hal's mouth opened, then closed. He tried again, and a croak that sounded like a strangled "Please" came out.

The king sighed and half-turned, speaking to his queen. "My dear, the form you bestowed upon him is punishment, surely — but how is he to repay you as a frog? He



can't even speak!"

"He can!" Lilly blurted. She continued, quieter, "He can speak fine. He's just very nervous right now, is all."

"Is that right?" the king said, over the furious monologue the queen had started.

Lilly nodded. "He told me to come here, that you were kind, and that you would help me find my brother."

"And did he tell you why he is a frog and not a prince?"

Lilly shook her head.

"Or did he lie to you and manipulate you and play with you as though you were a toy?"

Lilly shifted her weight uncomfortably. Hal did the same in her hand.

"I see." The king stood tall, considering. "My son has not made the best decisions in the past, and he is currently paying penance for his latest...excursion. But to bring me a softbody — that is something else entirely. Do you know how long it has been since a softbody walked the streets of Babbingen, or sat at my table?"

Lilly shook her head.

"Hundreds and hundreds of years. I was a troublemaking youngster myself when the last softbody gave himself over to a processing unit. We do not die, you see, as robots. We are repaired, backed up, transferred, but we never die. We never change, either. The great engineers considered everything: energy sources, locomotion, body types, coolants. But they could not duplicate evolution, even in individuals, how the soft wetworks of your bodies and minds reshape themselves, constantly creating you anew."

"Oh," Lilly said, feeling she should say something. He looked and sounded so very sad. "I'm sorry."

He sighed. "We have tried to backtrack, to move toward a fused bionics, flesh and mind. But without any softbodies around, we have no models. We can make flesh bodies, but not truly dynamic minds. That's why someone like you, appearing in our city, at this time, is such a wondrous thing."

Lilly blinked. She had a sudden image of herself on a table, mechanical gadgets whirring above her, her head split open to expose her "wetworks" to dissection.

"What exactly," she said slowly, "is it that you want me for?"

"Well, that's the question, isn't it?" the king said thoughtfully, at the same time his wife's muttering became audible again:

"I *need* her brain, Xavier."

Lilly took a step back, even as the king chuckled, covering the queen's outburst. "We'd just like to get to know you. If you could stay for a while, let us get to know how you work — nothing invasive or harmful, of course — we would be eternally grateful. I, and my kingdom, would be generous in our repayment of your gifts."

"*Rib*—What about me, Father?" Hal finally managed to croak. "I'm the one who brought her to you."

Of course, Lilly thought. You have the power of speech when it comes to something for yourself. Brat.

The king cocked his head, thoughtful. "Your mother and I will have to discuss that. I would hazard a guess that something could be arranged." He eyed Lilly. "I understand you are searching for your brother, but what if I sent messengers out instead? You could stay here with us, and he could come right here to you. And then the both of you could stay as long as you liked."

"Two!" the queen said, her excitement making her voice shrill. "Excellent, my husband."

Lilly eyed the king in return. The queen was quite clear in her intentions: she would quite literally have Lilly's head if left to her own devices. The king, however, was more difficult. She had come across many adults in her former life who were capable of masking their nastiness with handsome smiles and gentle façades. Men who were pleasant and winning with the child services employees, but cruel and hurtful when no consequences would befall them. Women who smiled and charmed her while spending the money meant for her care on spa days and, once, plastic surgery.

Lilly cocked her head up at the pilot, who'd been standing motionless over them.

The pilot scratched his long nose with one sharp finger and said, as though she'd asked him for the weather, "You had your chance. Try to fly away with me now, they shoot the envelope right out of the sky. Good luck, kid."

With that, he fired up the burner. The balloon lifted away, leaving them standing before the brain-hungry queen and her apathetic king with no allies and nowhere to run.

"Hal?" Lilly whispered, her voice shaking.

"I can't—I don't know."

"Think of something. *Now*."

"Well?" the king asked, holding his arms out in an expansive gesture. "Have you decided to stay with us?"

Hal was still flopped in her hand, dejected and useless. "If only we could get to my room..." he moaned.

Lilly smiled a brilliant orphan smile up at the king. "It's a wonderful offer for a girl like me, you know. I've never lived in a palace. Would I have my own room?"

"Of course! You may have your own wing!" The king laughed, happy that it seemed she would stay. Stay and succumb.

"Does it have a bath?"

"It has three," the king said. "Would you like to see?"

Lilly nodded. Without dismissing the crowd, the king whirled and led her straight to the palace. Lilly tried not to look at the queen's hungry face as she followed. The crowd, confused at the turn of events — much of which they hadn't even been able to hear — parted to let them through.

Lilly had no chance to speak to Hal again, following the king through the winding tubes and pipes that formed corridors through the palace.

"Will I be a princess?" she asked the king sweetly. "Will I have a princess room?"

"Certainly," he replied magnanimously, while the queen smirked. "You may even have Hal's room if you like! A true prince's room."

"Hey—" Hal started, but Lilly clamped down on him. A *Ribbit* vibrated through her hand.

They turned three and a half more corners, and the king ushered her into a large suite. It was full of half-finished projects, most of them intended to fly in some manner or another.

Lilly made the appropriate noises full of awe. Then there was an awkward silence as the king stood in the doorway, watching her.

"It's been a very long journey," she hinted to him. "Would it be all right if I cleaned up a bit?"

"Yes, of course." The king bowed to her slightly. "I'll have dinner brought up to you."

"A dinner of what?" the queen asked, wrenching her face around. "Let's just get on with it."

Lilly jumped backwards, out of her reach. The king and queen both fought for

control; neither, however, made any attempt to leave her safe in the Prince's quarters.

Lilly sucked in a quick breath and drove her shoulder into the robot, just above its wheeled base, just as Ben had shown her when wrestling larger opponents — and for Lilly, every opponent was larger. The king and queen shot backward into the corridor, both too shocked to hit the brakes, and Lilly slammed the door shut in their faces. She grabbed a nearby staff — who knew *what* Hal had used that for — to brace the door shut.

Hal pinched her leg from inside her pocket. "Lilly! Grab the glider." When she didn't move, he shouted, "The big kite against the wall, you nit!"

"I can't fly a glider!"

"It's easy," he scoffed. "You just hang on and lean in whatever direction you want to go."

"But how do I land?"

"Go down to the ground," he said simply. "Just not too fast."

Lilly went to the glider and poked at it as a high-pitched whirring began outside the door. "I don't think so."

"You can do it. Here, set me on the windowsill and I'll tell you how."

"You're not going with me?"

"Of course not. I'm the prince. I live here."

"But—"

"Just step into the harness," he said stubbornly. "And strap it on. Yep, just like that. You can leave right from my balcony — it's perfect for take-off. You push on the bar to go up, and pull it in to go down. Lean left to go left, right to go right. That's it."

The room's door crunched and shook. Lilly peered at the wings rising over her head. "This is not a good idea. I'm going to wind up creamed corn."

"No, my dear," said the queen's voice behind her. "I'm afraid creamed corn does my work no good whatsoever."

Lilly and Hal both jumped. Lilly swung around so hard that one of the glider's wings slammed into the wall, knocking a set of model dirigibles off a shelf.

The queen rolled toward them. "And you, my pathetic offspring. Conspiring to steal one of my possessions? And possibly to destroy it?"

"What possession?" he squeaked.

"This possession." The queen's claw swept toward Lilly. "You know what happens when you damage my things."

Hal hopped toward Lilly, his throat balloon bulging. "Rib—now! Lilly, we have to go—*ribbit!*"

The queen was nearly close enough to touch them, to grab the glider's wing. If she did that, Lilly would never free herself of the harness in time to run, even if she had somewhere to run to.

Without thinking, she swept the frightened frog into her skirt pocket, shoved open the balcony door, and leaped.

Into the air. Into the nothingness. Flying. Falling.

The queen screeched behind her, and one claw scraped across the fabric wing. The glider shuddered and started a slow spiral.

"Lean right!" Hal screamed. "You'll put it into a spin!!!"

Lilly leaned right — or thought she did. Her body did not move. It was as frozen as the Tin Man, her fear rusting her tight. The high-rises and skyscrapers of Babbingen City bristled up at her, zooming nearer and nearer, their spindles and spires reaching out to snag her and stab her. Her eyes squeezed shut as the air whipped past her. Blackness and cold overwhelmed her as she sank, sank, drifted and fell... *The room was cold. They'd turned the heating off again. Lilly wrapped her blanket tightly about her body. The cold had awakened her. What if it awakened him? Her brain spun with dizziness, with the fear, with the knowledge that she could do nothing to stop him, nothing...*

"You can do this. Lean right!" Hal screamed again. "And push the bar!"

Lilly forced her eyes open. They were falling much more quickly now, and she felt her muscles kick in with a jolt. She leaned hard to the right and pushed on the bar. The glider straightened and lifted — but then it began another uncontrolled spiral to the right.

"Too much! This isn't that hard, you stupid softbody girl!"

Lilly corrected, and this time she found the middle. The glider straightened again, and caught a warm breeze riding across the tops of the Babbingen buildings. It swept them up and away, until finally she saw the black stitches of the railroad tracks running across the landscape.

"The rail!" she shouted to Hal. "Where does it go?"

He poked his head out of her pocket once more. "I don't know," he shouted back. "But it's a railroad — it must go somewhere."

We'll follow it then, she thought. We'll follow it to somewhere, and hopefully

to Ben.

## Chapter 4

### Threading the 'While

FærLife is about 68,423,659 miles long and just as wide, with more diversions than you can shake a forest's worth of sticks at, but this is the only place on the Thread with a queue. They line up outside it, each waiting for their time alone on the grass in the centre of thirteen hulking monoliths. One by one they walk/fly/crawl/roll in, and one by one they lie there and stare at the sky. Some of them mutter some mumbo-jumbo. A few of the less imaginative wave magic wands or burn some incense. And every one of them, regardless of their results or lack thereof, thanks Amelia on their way out.

She's never there to receive their thanks, of course. They thank her like she's the Buddy Christ, beaming down at them from on high.

She didn't build it for them. She doesn't care if they come or not. She didn't really mean to build it. She just sat down on an empty lot one day, trying to think up the things she wanted to do in the world I created for her. She sat there for a good, oh, ten days or so, until something sparked, or released, or just plain woke up. When she opened her eyes and stood up, those thirteen archaic stones were circled round, bowing their heads toward her.

Thing is, she didn't code them.

FærLife is different from my First World. I got bored with that one, what with all the natural laws making everything so predictable. Here, things are more like

they used to be. When they get tired of the conversation, the trees wander off same as anybody else. Buildings can be made of sea-sponges and teacups. People don't have to be people-shaped. Makes the stories more interesting, like that orchid-armadillo who kept mistaking his tail for his penis.

In the end though, they're all code. The aquarium is built from 1s and 0s in interleaving bricks. The market is jim-jammed with snippets encoding stalls and booths and hawkers, where anyone with credits can tap a button and buy the code for a pair of wings or a motor-copter.

Amelia's Circle isn't code. It's made out of dream. She dreamed it, and within it, what she dreams becomes. Every once in a blue moon, somebody wanders into her circle, squeezes their eyes and their blowhole tight, and their dreams become, too. So they come. And respectfully, they clear out when she tells them to.

Except for him.

I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been. I'm not a multi-tasker. I got to telling Amelia's story, and that boring bastard slipped right in.

It wasn't a scheduled stop. I forgot to wipe the train station is all, after Amelia's train came through. So when he requested the stop, the train obliged.

When he stepped into the FærLife, he had almost no reaction to the digital transformation of his body; he only checked the pockets of his now pixelated overcoat to ensure all his possessions were still in place. When he found them intact, he shuffled on.

He's not supposed to be in her story.

\*\*\*

**There are no rules in this game. For it is not a game. You know that.**



I DON'T MUCH CARE. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO LEAVE MY STORIES ALONE.

The way you have always left my stories alone? The way rabbit was never dunked into a septic pool, the way my princesses are never tricked into poisoned apples?

THAT'S DIFFERENT. THAT'S MAKING THEM STORIES.

So you say.

DO WE HAVE A DEAL? YOU STAY OUT OF MINE, I STAY OUT OF YOURS?

Hmm. I think not.

\*\*\*

She's lying on her back in the middle of the stone circle, legs relaxed, arms palm-up by her side. She looks spent, with her eyes closed and her mouth quirked just that Mona Lisa bit. It's almost my favorite picture of her. The other one is that time she turned to the entirety of her grandfather's pub and flipped them the bird and her ass at the same time.

She looks a lot like she did the first day she got off the FærTrain. Inside the train, she looked how she's used to looking, like she walked off the set of *Beetlejuice*. But outside the train, she became how I tell her. Her skin flushes in a programmed approximation of skin, flesh-coloured and round. Her hair is dreadlocked, purple and green, which good old grandpa would never permit. Her clothes are merely differently coloured skin, forming her body in blacks and stripes. It's not her only avatar. Just the most comfortable.

I can hear him coming. The whole 'Life can hear the ignorant tool coming. He's stolen a motor-coptor from somewhere down the Thread, though he's only figured out the motor- part. The rotors stay folded, the engine screaming at being grounded. The usual crowd around Ami's Circle mumbles and grumbles and even shouts in typical crowd dismay as he rumble-screams past them, straight into

the middle of the stones. Straight at Ami.

"Seriously?" she asks, one eye opening. She sighs and leaves the Circle, straight up.

Few 'Lifers ever let go of the memory of their flesh well enough to fly. It's not programmed into their digital bodies; nothing, really, is programmed into their digital bodies. Tell you the truth, even the code available in the markets is only a suggestion; it's the mind that turns it into reality. And Ami's mind is blown wide open.

The greasy little grunge boy spins out on his bike, tearing an inner circle in the grass as he stares up at her diminishing form.

"Great," he says to the bike, flipping toggles at random. As though an interfering little birdie is whispering in his ear, he manages to unfold his rotors and chug into the sky after her before the crowd of worshipers can manage to tear them – and him – from the bike.

I pull myself into a physical form, cloud after cloud, surrounding him, blinding him. I beat him with rain. I zap him a couple of times with a lightning bolt before I realise he hasn't bothered to download the code that lets him feel any of it. He's just a numb, storyless form.

Ami is stretched out on a cloud when he finally reaches her. I trail behind, shaping myself into a skulking dog.

"Hello," she says.

"Hello," he replies.

**MAKE HIM GO AWAY, AMI.**

I send the message to her so he can't see it. She just waves it away.

"What would you do if I kicked that noisy thing right out from under you?" Ami asks him, wagging her combat boot in illustration.

"I'd fall."

Ami laughs. She spreads her arms and rises, hovering several feet above her misty dais.

"I don't fall," she tells him. "But you're right. You'd fall, and you might even die. Why are you here?"

"I'm Ben. I'm looking for my sister. I keep hearing your name, like you're some kind of Wizard of Oz here. I thought you might know something."

With one sweep of her arm, she wipes away the clouds, including mine. Below, the FærLife landscape rolls out before us. It looks like the inside of a sphere, never ending, only terminating when the eyes can no longer process the distance. "No," she says, "why are you *here*?"

He stares down. He should have a problem with the perspective. It should turn his bowels to water. At the very least, the stupid shit should lose his balance, topple off his perch, and fall screaming to the ground, impaling himself on some form of sharp architecture.

But he does not throw up, or crap himself, or fall to a fiery wet doom. He gazes again at Ami, and then has the nerve to shrug. "I don't even know where the hell here is. I rolled a weird old bum, got on a train that I thought would lead me to my sister, and got off here. Now I can't get back on the train, or get out of this world—"

**Story**, I thought at him. I never should have helped Her lead him to the 'while. He is not supposed to be in this story. He is supposed to stick to his own tragic pathetic tale of transformation, the ones that She tells, the ones that make me want to vomit my pancreas from

boredom.

"—and I just want to find my sister and go home."

"Go home?" Amelia blinks at him, incredulous. "Why would you want to go home? This...this is like heaven. Like heaven should be, anyway."

At this, Ben actually grins. "Heaven's a load of bullshit. This place is a load of bullshit too. It's like being in a cartoon."

Amelia loses all pretence of friendliness. "What the hell would you know about it? You're still tied to this idea of physicality, of life and death, of limits and rules and boundaries."

"Maybe," he admits. "I generally like to know what the rules and boundaries are. Helps if you're going to be crossing some of them."

"You're just going to have to figure it out yourself. I don't want to get out."

"But you know how to."

"I've never wanted to try."

"And you know how to shapeshift. And you built the Circle."

"You know all that, and you still can't get your sorry self out of here."

She's right. He's not entirely stupid. He should have figured out an exit by now, especially since I haven't been doing anything to keep him here. This has to be Her doing. Damn busybody.

"Nope, I can't." Now he grins. Smug bastard. "And it seems to me, you can't either."

Uh-oh.

"Why would I want to?" Amelia rolls a very slow backflip. "This is the best place I've ever been in my

life."

"Uh-huh. Home sweet home, huh?"

She falls out of the flip. "I don't have a home."

"So this is it? Float around on clouds, build magic circles that actually are magic, and what? Program some kids, maybe a dog?"

"Yes, because kids and a husband and a dog are the ultimate goals of life."

He shrugs again. "Not for me. Not for you then, either. I know what I'm looking for, though. Do you?"

Ami rolls her eyes. "This is stupid. I came up here for peace and quiet, not a goddamned sermon."

"So show me how to get out of your perfect world, and I'll go."

"I have a better idea."

He barely has time to raise his eyebrows before she zooms away, firing toward the landside of FærLife.

\*\*\*

I installed a virus in his ride. It crashed; he found another. I installed a virus in his avatar. He walked around looking like a six-foot tall naked female toddler, and didn't blink an eye. Every time he got within a block of Amelia, I made sure he fell in a hole. I like holes. I fill them with all manner of gooey and crunchy things. Scorpions. Snakes. Eyeballs. Dog crap. **Sick** dog crap. He shrugged it off and kept going.

He could have picked on a million other 'whilers here – but he didn't. He picked her.

She's at the Circle when he finally circumvents the last of my barriers. He's quick, even if he refuses to imagine any powers beyond that of an analog human.

Ben – somehow back in his trench-coat and black

mussed hair – just trots right on in. He leans over her head as he says this, blocking out her sun. Just for fun I make his shadow look like a mouse.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" she says without opening her eyes. She doesn't move, but her face is now tense.

"I'm a dick like that."

"You said it."

He sighs. "I'm just looking for my sister. I'd like to get out of your hair, if you'll just show me how to get out of this place."

"Bugger off."

"Nope. Can't."

Ami rolls away from him, sitting back on her knees. "What makes you think I'm so goddamned special?"

He shrugs. "I don't. Every other idiot here does, lining up like you're the Goth Buddha. What makes *you* think you're so goddamned special?"

"Fuck off."

He almost does. So close. He actually makes it to the edge of the stone circle before stopping, his fists clenched.

A snowball forms in Amelia's palm, a tiny planet of frozen prisms bursting in the sunlight. She pegs him in the back with it. "Why do you keep bothering me? Why me?"

Ben turns around, stares at his hands. "Because you're the only one here who can create a way out."

"Create?" She says the word faintly, as though she's unfamiliar with it. And she is. She's not really a creator, not like me, not even like the Other. She dreams, and she's fortunate enough to be in a part of the

'while where that's enough.

Silence covers the circle. Ami twirls a finger idly through her hair; the strand swirls through all the colours of the rainbow, then all the snakes of the Southwest. Ben watches her, waiting.

Finally, he says, "Her name is Lilly. She was eight the last time I saw her; she'd be eleven now. She was easier to place in foster homes, see – younger, a girl. She could pretend better than I could, pretend like she was happy. That was her favorite thing, actually, pretending. She liked me to read to her. She'd get up and act the stories out, lost somewhere that wasn't all about sleeping on hard concrete or timing visits to soup kitchens so we could get enough feed."

Amelia crosses her legs, her posture inviting him over for a pow-wow.

**HE WAS ABOUT TO LEAVE! JUST LET HIM GO.**

"I'm bored," Amelia says softly to me. Louder, she asks Ben, "What happened to your parents?"

"Killed." That's all he says, and his face hardens, its teenage softness dropping away, what little of it there is.

Amelia nods. She doesn't say "Mine too," doesn't tell him she's an orphan too. She knows better, I guess. Getting to live with your grandparents in a nice warm house in a friendly little village doesn't quite carry the same hardship as scratching out a notion of survival on Los Angeles streets.

Ben sits across from her, his coat puddling on the ground. I let a little ground water rise to the surface underneath him.

"How do you know your sister is here?"

"I saw her, just for a second." He tells her about the book – even takes it out of his pocket and shows it to her – and the underground metro station. He tells her about me, how I gave him the map, how he saw his sister on the passing train.

Amelia frowns down at me. "So this is a habit for you, is it, Tal?" she whispers.

**MORE LIKE A TALENT.**

"Sorry?" Ben asks, but she only shakes her head.

Ben says, "Just get me on a train. If she were here, I would have found her. She's not. I just want to find her, but I have to get out of here first."

Amelia sighs. "It might not be that easy."

"It's generally not."

She looks up at one of the stones, her expression tight. "All right. But if I'm helping you, you have to make some effort to not be such a tool."

Ben bristles. "If you make some effort not to be such a bitch."

"Hey, who's helping who here?" Amelia begins drifting above the circle. "First," she calls to Ben, "you have to think some happy thoughts. Fairy dust not included."

\*\*\*

**HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GET OUT WITHOUT HER HELP. NOW  
LOOK WHAT HE'S GOTTEN HER INTO.**

Are you accusing me of...what do you call it? Hacking?

**I'M ACCUSING YOU OF MEDDLING.**

I think maybe you're incapable of controlling your own characters in your own story.

**AND I THINK YOU'RE A SPOILED ROTTEN BRAT WHO'S BEEN LEFT TO TELL  
THE TALES ON HER OWN FOR FAR TOO LONG.**



Vinegar or honey, honey. Have you learned nothing from my stories?

I CAN'T STAY AWAKE LONG ENOUGH TO HEAR THE END OF ANY OF YOUR STORIES. YAWN.

That's a tragedy. Oh, look. They're fighting. May I suggest telling your story instead of ranting at me? Things do have a way of spiralling when you're not paying attention to them.

SHIT.

\*\*\*

"I never told you I could do it, you pathetic, whining, useless *jolido!*" Amelia is screaming right into Ben's face. Ben stares right back at her, nonplussed. "Find your own goddamned way out, and don't ever come near me again."

She walks away. In her anger, she has developed orange and white stripes over her body, rippling over her muscles as she moves. A long, sensuous tail follows behind her.

Ben, a black rat at best, stands still, folding his arms. "It's pissing you off, isn't it? That even the great Prophet Amelia can't find a way out of her own magical fairyland."

She whirls on him, sharp feline teeth flashing. "I'm not a fucking prophet, and this isn't my fairyland. I'm not the queen, or the president, or the moderator, or whatever. I just live here."

"You call this living, do you?"

"YES!!! Go away!" Her tail lashes. "God."

Ben reaches out and grabs her tail. I laugh, even if he is annoying my plaything. Tail-grabbing always leads to something fun, like somebody's head getting eaten.

Ami growls and swats his hand.

Ben lets go. His hand is bleeding, bright red #F12600. Maybe he'll bleed out.

"I tried," Ami says, her voice low and tight. "I got you into the train station where no trains come. I imagined a train, but you're too dull to dream it into moving. I imagined a door for you, but you're too stupid to dream it into opening. I imagined a Stargate, a wormhole, a looking-glass, a portal, a vortex, a spaceship, even a goddamned wardrobe, but you can't play the fucking game! I did what you wanted. Now fuck off."

"You can do something about it. You just don't want to. You're kinda lazy. Come on, you know you can get out of here anytime you want."

"I don't want to!" She's in his face now, her mouth wide and dripping with carnivorous saliva. If he had any senses, her breath would smell rotten, dead, but he doesn't, so he just sighs and reaches out to thump one of her long, sharp canine teeth.

"Chill out, Tiger Lily. What was it you said to me? Think happy thoughts. Your happy thought for today: the sooner you get me out of here, the sooner you get back to your regularly scheduled meditation on how awesome you are."

Ami screeches, but she steps back. Her features come back to resembling the human, reluctantly. She looks down at her feet, and a pair of old saddle shoes appear over the tiger paws.

"Just like a chick," Ben comments. "Say the phrase 'happy thoughts' and they go buy new shoes."

Ami's leg stripes resolve, the orange and white camouflage straightening out to ordinary striped tights. Above those, a denim mini-skirt, and a brown and orange paisley top. She's like a teenage girl's Halloween costume of her mom in the 60s. But it's no longer

murderous in its very appearance.

She glares at Ben, then stares up at the sky. "I came here from somewhere else. You came here from somewhere else. This world is not infinite, even though it looks like it is. And if it's not infinite, there is an edge. You just have to find it."

"Okay, but where?"

"Not here."

She jets up into the air, morphing into a falcon, whose orange and white stripes would be found nowhere in nature. Ben runs one hand tiredly through his hair and jumps up, very very hard. He's not able to morph at the same time, not able to morph at all, but he can hold himself aloft and keep up with her – just. I appear high in the sky, a tiny swallow, too small and too high for him to really see, and poop repeatedly on his head.

We fly and fly and fly. Ami has to come back to drag Ben along several times, but she never stops flying. She flies farther than she ever has before, out into sections that have long been abandoned. Some sit in 8-bit glory, occasionally firing tiny white squares at us, but mostly just rotting into nostalgia. We pass out of colour, and into monochrome flatspace. And farther, into text, which has mostly degenerated into random wads of command prompts.

Still, there is no boundary to be found.

Ben calls out, "We're not getting anywhere!"

"Sure we are," Ami replies. "At the very least, we've gotten a history lesson. What came before code?"

"Like I'm going to know."

Amelia slows, flying at Ben's pace. Her wings glide gently on a breeze underneath a plain white sky. "Look,

there – punch cards. I read about those once. If we get past those, we get to the world before computers created it."

"What world before? You mean the world? Computers don't create anything."

"Idiot. This is why you're flapping around up here in a trench coat. Computers create this entire world. But what created worlds before computers?"

Ben rubs his face. His tiny brain is clearly struggling to keep up with her. It's all I can do not to shout "I did!"

The white, the scattering of chits from computer punch cards, the strange one-dimensionality, it fades out gradually. They both drift down, down, down, no longer managing to fly in a space where their thoughts do not become instant code, processed and running like a stream of infinite data. Amelia is even struggling to hold her form together. Ben's form is perfectly intact; it would never cross his mind that he is only what he imagines himself to be, and thus, he is simply himself, no more no less, just as he has always been and will always be. Boring.

There is no true ground, no surface to land on. Only the black nothingness, the feeling of absence, just as she had described to Ben.

"What is this?" he says. "This doesn't make any sense. There was a world before computers."

Amelia's voice is a bit staticky. "I think...I think there wasn't. Not in this world."

"So we're stuck here. We can't get out because there's just nothing. No data."

"Can you be quiet? I need to think, and I'm having

problems multitasking out here."

Ben cocks his head at her. "What...are you a program?"

A sigh. "You don't get it at all, do you? I'm a program, you're a program, we're all programs once we step into FærLife. I embrace it, which means I can be more here. You don't embrace it, so you're just you. But where the processors no longer work, you're a little more put together than I am because you don't need them to hold you together... because you've never been anything other than you."

"Have you been here so long you don't remember who you are anymore? That's not the brightest idea I've ever —"

"Seriously, what part of STFU don't you understand?"

He rolls his eyes, but falls quiet.

Long moments pass. I, like Amelia, have a hard time keeping a form together out here, so I revert back to a familiar shape. As Raven, I'm still not very visible in the darkness; I can, however, still dive bomb Ben.

"Goddammit!" he yells. "Amelia, call your pet off!"

Pet, my ass. I reach for an eyeball.

"Tal." Amelia's voice is laughing, trying hard to be stern. "You don't need his eyeball. Leave him alone for five minutes, and we'll be rid of him."

I squawk, and settle. Ben watches me, eyes narrowed.

Suddenly, they widen. "Amelia!"

She's faded away, her visual form sacrificed to the thinking process.

"Amelia! Where'd you go?"

A vague white mist appears, hovering next to Ben.

"I'm here, noob. I'm trying to concentrate on one thing, and I don't need an avatar to do that. Now will you

please shut your pie hole?"

"I know what came before."

"Now you're full of ideas. What?"

"Computers are information, right?"

"No, they're machines that process information."

"Whatever. It's about information at the core.

Before we had computers we had books—"

"You want a book? Out here?"

"What part of STFU don't you understand?" Ben reaches into his coat and pulls out that mouldy old notebook. "I got here through a book, you got here through a computer."

"So?"

"So before there were books there were just stories." He waves the book, its pages spitting dust.

"And?"

"And..." His arm droops. "And I don't know where to go from there. I just thought...computers...books...stories. I used to read her stories, you know, and stories can take you places."

"You want to Reading Rainbow out of here?"

"I don't...I don't know. Nevermind."

Amelia's mist swirls. "Hold on, technophobe. You might have something. I mean, what you imagine here happens."

Ben throws his hands out. "You think I haven't tried to imagine myself outside of here? Once I figured out how this place works, it's all I tried to do."

"Place and time, Benny boy, place and time. I don't know if there's anything spatially beyond this point, or if we've moved an inch once we got into this nothingness. But if there's anywhere in FærLife where the border

between this imagination-generated world and all the other worlds is thin, this has to be it. It'll be easier to break through here."

"Okay, so why haven't we?"

"You, why haven't *you*. Remember, I don't want to go anywhere with you, *amigo*."

Another eye roll. I wonder if I can make them stick like that. "Fine, fine, why haven't I?"

"You haven't tried."

"What do I— Look, can you put some kind of face on or something? I feel like I'm talking to Casper, after your friend the raven or the wolf or whatever he feels like being today has gotten to his eyes."

Amelia laughs. "He generally gives them back, eventually. You shouldn't be so worried about him." But she pulls it together a bit, and becomes herself. In monochrome, somewhat transparent, so...a ghost of herself.

Relieved to be looking at another pair of eyes in the nothing, Ben says, "So what is it you think I have to do?"

Amelia exhales. "I'm not a hundred percent sure it'll work—"

"Fuck!"

"—but it's worth a try, right? Just...no guarantees, that's all." Amelia raises her eyebrows, and Ben does that asinine eye roll again (they really do deserve to be pecked out), then nods. "So what I think is, you need to tell a story. Any story you really get into, maybe that you shared with your sister a lot. Tell it, and believe it when you tell it."

"Believe it? What the hell does that mean?"

"Jesus, you're a thick bastard, aren't you?" Yes. "Believe it like you said your sister believed them, where

she would get up and act them out, and be the people in the stories, believe that she was in those places."

Ben is shaking his head. What a punk ass bitch.

"Will you just do it already? There is no fucking exit door. We tried it, it didn't work. You're going to have to make your own."

Ben rubs his palms over his hair again. They leave wet streaks and plastered strands. "I'll try. There was a story Lilly used to love. I think I can remember it. It's hard – she used to change it every time we read it."

"Would it help if I made myself look like her?"

"No!" Ben looks startled. "No, sorry, just no."

Ami shrugs. "Whatever. Go, then."

Ben is uncertain, his eyes flickering from Amelia to nothing and back again. He finally settles on the nothing and fumbles his way into his story.

"Once upon a time – well, that's not really how it started in the book, but I can't really remember..."

"It doesn't matter if you get it perfect. Just tell the story."

He nods, inhales to start again. "Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young Indian maid. God, this sounds dumb."

"Keep going, you fucktard. You can't keep pulling yourself out."

It's not that hard, kid. You just tell a story. Everybody does it at some point.

He clenches his teeth and goes on. "There was a beautiful young Indian maid. She was the daughter of the chief, but he was forever on the warpath, and never home. Her mother..." Amelia fades to nothing, and Ben's eyes drift away into the other world. "Well, see, they lived



on this island where there were no mothers. No one ever knew why, but there just weren't any mothers. Sure, she had to have a mother at some point, but no one could remember her, especially the girl."

He goes on, his voice shaking in the black edge between worlds. Slowly, the nothingness takes on a sense that it is no longer nothing. It is becoming the idea of something, and that's the most important something of everything.

"...She's out at the lake for a reason, see. Somehow, someone had gotten word to her that the mermaids knew something about her mother..."

In the distance, the idea of something shimmers. Moonlight on water. The black behind Ben darkens, forming clumps and shapes. Lightning sparks through me – I remember my first time, making mud out of the black.

But Ben, the idiot, opens his eyes. "...only it was a trick, 'cause the pirates wanted to—holy shit, it's working!" And it all flickers, fades away, like a monitor dropping into sleep.

"Keep going," Amelia urges.

"She—she's tied up." Ben squeezes his eyes shut, and now his voice and his whole body are shaking. "And the mermaids are laughing..."

The moonlit scene returns, bit by bit. The landscape is easy; Ben's subconscious fills in the gaps with trees and rocks and lapping waves and a small island in the middle of the lake. By the time he gets to the part where the unlikely little boy is about to bust out all over the pirates, a small rowboat is emerging on the lake's surface.

"It's him, the leader of the tribe of shitheads – I

mean, wild boys – who roam the island, attacking her people whenever they feel like it..."

His voice is becoming fainter now, his body mimicking Amelia's translucence. The story spills out of him, told from a different perspective than anyone – save himself and his sister, maybe – has ever told before.

His created world, his storyland, becomes vividly clear. The water smells of kelp, and in its gurgles I can hear the mermaids giggling. The metallic clashes of the sword fight echo off the water, the rocks, drifting away over the tops of the trees. The moonlight is silver and clear, washing over everything like a cool bath.

Then it is gone. And with it, Ben.

The nothing returns, as though it had never left. Somehow, in the wake of Ben's story, the nothing is more – or perhaps less – than it was before, and I ache in it. I ache to begin again, to craft a tale that will create oceans and earths and peoples and mud and shit and smiles and laughter.

"Tal?" Amelia's voice is small, and yet so loud.

Amelia. I forgot. I'm already in the middle of a story. I want it to end already. I want a new toy.

I clap, but I don't take a form for her.

**WELL DONE, AMI. YOU SENT HIM AWAY. LET'S GO HOME.**

Amelia's virtual body pushes through the darkness. She appears not in her comfortable goth FærLife avatar, but rather as a small, pale girl, her black mourning dress a size too large.

"Home?" she repeats, as though the word is no longer among her vocabulary. She blinks through the wet crusting her eyelashes. "Oh, I know what you mean."

She doesn't fly. She just imagines herself back on

the Thread.

I follow, but I'm churning with other stories. Hers has played out, and with far too few exchanges of body parts or offal.

\*\*\*

You've been unkind to the girl.

IT'S NOT MY JOB TO BE KIND. I JUST TELL THE STORIES. WHEN THEY  
STOP BEING INTERESTING, I TELL A NEW ONE.

I don't think you know interesting from a hole in your butt.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT IT, OH TELLER OF TALES?

More than you. I can see the story yet to come.

DO YOU NOW? BRING IT.

## Chapter 5

### Streams Slipping in the Dark

Just pick one. It doesn't matter — you have the same chance of either one landing facing up.

NOT WHEN I THROW A COIN.

You're not throwing it. I am. Now pick.

WHAT'S THE FUN OF FLIPPING A COIN IF NO ONE'S CHEATING?

No one cheating is the point of flipping a coin. Choose, or in three seconds, you will be tails.

THAT'S NOT REALLY GIVING ME A CHOICE, IS IT?

Three...two...one...

ALL RIGHT, FINE. HEADS. I PICK HEADS.

Tails. You lose. I choose the left-hand queendom this time.

FINE, WHATEVER. I NEVER LIKED THAT SQUALID LITTLE PATCH ANYWAY.

WAIT — WHICH ONE'S THE LEFT AGAIN?

\*\*\*

At least he's not wearing that grubby trench coat anymore. But just what is he wearing? His hair is slicked back, with a few rakish strands drifting around his face. His jeans are a bit beaten, and rather than a black T-shirt he wears...a cream *blouse* under suspenders. He looks like half a pirate.

Which makes sense, considering he's currently standing on the bow of a pirate ship. There's the Jolly Roger floating over his head, and, yup, that's the snivelling boatswain Smee grovelling behind him. The Captain, that mad wank, is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he's still back on that overgrown daycare of an island, trying to hide from a giant reptile with a taste for human flesh.

They make port at a small fishing village, anchoring in shallow waters. Ben fights the clingy Smee off and rows himself – alone – to shore. A few villagers, meandering about on their daily chores, nod to him. Most smirk.

"'Scuse me, miss," Ben calls to a youngish woman gutting fish near the small pier. "Can you tell me where I am?"

She tosses some innards into a bucket near his shoes, not caring if she misses. He steps back. "You're standing right here is where you are."

Ben clenches his teeth. "Can you please tell me what town this is?"

"This here's the village."

"I can see that." Teeth grind. "But say I wasn't here, and I wanted to get here. Where would I tell people I was going?"

"How would I know that? I ain't never come here from nowhere else."

Ben tugs his hair. "Fine. Is there a bus station? Train?"

She throws more carcass on his shoes. "Never heard of 'em."

"An inn, then, maybe where carriages pass through?"

She shrugs.

His fingers flex. "Is there anyone I can ask for information?"

"About what?"

Ben turns and stomps away, taking out his frustration on the pebbled beach beneath his tennis shoes. He hasn't even had time to count to ten before he passes the last shack in the village.

A sharp cry strikes him from above, like no bird he's ever heard. He turns his face skyward, one hand raised to protect against anything falling from the buttocks area of any flying creature. An enormous bird swoops low in the sky – whoops, not a bird. Not a jet plane, not even Superman. It's a person with wings, a human seagull who doesn't seem to have much control over his wings – no, a kite of some sort.

It sweeps overhead, and Ben glimpses the pilot's face. A young girl, her face fuzzy with confusion, dark hair flapping in the wind.

Not a gull. Not a boy. And not just any girl – Lilly.

"Hey!" he shouts, breaking into a run. "Lilly! Lilly, I'm right here! Land!"

But either she doesn't hear him, or she doesn't have sufficient control over her kite-thing. She glides on, a gust from the sea pushing her higher, farther. Ben sprints toward her, but by the time his lungs begin to burn, she is only a distant speck, going, going, gone.

He stops, drops his hands to his knees, sucking in heaps of air. A faint track stretches westward in front of him through the brambles and boulders that frame the pebble beach – an old trade road, maybe a game trail.

Westward he goes.

\*\*\*

The soft sighing of the clouds lulls her. Her body has settled into the rhythm of flight, automatically pushing and pulling the bar when needed. The wind's white noise presses her into a thick stupor. Slowly, her eyelids surrender to their sudden weight.

*Something she did has attracted his attention, pulled him out of the light doze he's capable of slipping into and out of at will. The others dream of mothers who have disappeared, love that has never come, may never come. Lilly dreams of these things.*

*She does not understand how he never does.*

*She can smell him beside her bed now, the cheap deodorant their foster mother insists he wear, and something sweet, sticky, like old pancake syrup spilled on a table. She tries to keep her breaths flowing in and out in the rhythm of sleep.*

*"I know you're awake, Lilly."*

A sharp pain between her thumb and forefinger reattaches her to the here, the glider and the air and the earth below. Except the earth is not terribly far below, not far at all.

"Wake up, you useless girl!" Hal is shouting at her. A froggie mouth-shaped mark bubbles up in a red welt on her hand. "You're going to crash, and ruin my best glider! Pull up!"

She blinks at him, at the earth rushing to crush her, then pulls up on the bar. Nothing much happens, except that her hands smudge *into* the bar, nearly pulling straight through it.

*Concentrate*, she tells herself. *You did this before*. She focuses on her hands, on her skin and bones and muscles all being real, being flesh and solid.

Her hands respond, and this time they do not fade all the way through the bar. But it's too late. A spindly branch — Lilly spies small wrinkled pears out of the corner of her eye — stretches out, snagging the corner of her right wing. She and Hal are whipped around, the glider suddenly a whirlybird. The pear tree gains a grip on the other wing as it cycles, pulls the whole apparatus up as far as it can reach, and spikes them into the ground below.

Lilly lies still on the ground. It has stolen her breath, and the weight of the glider on top of her refuses to allow the air back in. Hal *ribbits* feebly a few feet away, turned over on his back, his legs flopping uselessly in the air. Lilly shoves, bucking, her lungs compelling her to free herself enough to breathe. The glider slides reluctantly away. Her ribs expand and suck in a gust.

"You've ruined it," Hal groans.

"Lucky for that tree breaking our fall," Lilly says.

"That tree caused our fall. I think it's laughing at us."

Lilly peers at the tree. She wonders if it might try to throw its fruit at them.

A whirring-clicking draws her attention to Hal. She reaches out, concentrating on her fingers again, and tips him right-side-up.

"Do you know where we are?" she asks him.

"Underneath a pear tree that doesn't like little girls who fly."

"Hmm." Lilly eyes the tree. "I can't see anything from down here. Do you think the tree will let me climb it?"

"As long as I'm safe here on the ground, I don't care what you do."

Lilly reaches out an experimental hand to the pear tree's trunk. The tree does not try to bite her, which she takes as a good sign. Slowly, focusing very hard on making her body as solid as possible, she ascends through its branches until she can sit on a lean twig just barely able to hold her weight. Gripping it hard with her legs, she scans the landscape.

"Oh, wow," she says. "You think *your* castle's big. Wait till you see this."

"I don't have a castle. I have a palace. There's a difference."

"Whatever." This might be a palace as well, but it's certainly a castle. It juts up like a mountain, crowning the top of a hill and dwarfing it. "It's not terribly far away," Lilly tells Hal. "Castles are where people are, right? Where we can get some help? Better help than your parents, anyway."

Hal does not answer. Lilly pauses, trying to look down through the branches.

"Hal? Come on, Hal, that's not funny."

But he still does not respond, so Lilly quickly drops down through the tree's foliage. She lands lightly on her feet on the other side of the trunk and peeks around.

Hal is backed against the trunk, making himself as small as possible as a black crow examines him. The bird is almost as big as Lilly, and appears to be much more confident in his body's solidity than she is.

"Hey!" she shouts. "Shoo! That's not your frog."

The bird does not budge, even when she waves her arms and steps toward him. Her. The crow's voice is feminine when she answers, though dry and crackling. "I'm a crow, kid. Since when do you expect crows to observe any semblance of morality?"

With that, her beak darts forward to clamp over Hal's metal body. He lets out a cry of alarm, but it dwindles quickly as the crow spreads her wings and flaps off into the sky in the direction of the castle.

"Hal!" Lilly leaps after the bird, hoping to grab a tail feather at least. Her fingers brush the satiny black, but her concentration is shot and they pass right through. The bird lets out a delighted cackle, dropping Hal into a momentary free-fall before she catches him again in her talons.

"Oh, no." Lilly drops, defeated, to sit cross-legged beneath the tree. "I'm sorry,



Hal."

"Well, don't just sit there," the tree comments.

"I'll never catch up to him," she moans to the tree, not even caring that she is speaking to a tree. After all, she's very recently kidnapped a mechanical frog prince; not much else could seem strange at this point. "Look at me. I can barely catch up to myself."

"I've met squirrels with more gumption," the tree says, then refuses to say anything more.

Miserable, feeling the tree's judgment heavily upon her, Lilly edges out from the shadows. She squints in the direction of the castle.

"I really wish I had a bicycle," she comments to no one in particular. "Bicycles make things so much easier."

But she does not have a bicycle, or a car, or even a scooter. She has her feet, through which she can see blades of grass poking up, and they're going to have to be good enough. She sets out, heading east.

\*\*\*

THIS MIRROR THING IS FOR THE BIRDS. I COULD HAVE COME UP WITH A MILLION BETTER WAYS TO TALK. SOUP CANS, FOR ONE.

It's a classic. You have no sense of tradition.

YOU HAVE NO SENSE OF ADVENTURE. DID THE GIRL CRASH AND DIE?

She crashed. She is fine, however, and I'll be sure to share your concern with her.

HEY, I'M NOT THE DEATH-MONGER HERE. SHE'S MUCH MORE USEFUL ALIVE. HE'D PROBABLY GIVE UP AND DROWN HIMSELF IF HE KNEW SHE WAS DEAD.

Well, she isn't. Move on.

I'M MOVED.

\*\*\*

It couldn't be. He'd been able to see for miles when he was up on top of that hill. Nothing but forest, sea, and that one distant goal. He'd have noticed train tracks. He's sure of it, as sure as he is of anything in a world where avatars live side-by-side with pirates.

But there it is again. A whistle, and that faint vibrating chug that indicates a massive beast rushing at speed over iron and steel. A train. It has to be.

The forest spits him out. One moment he's in the midst of trees so thick they nearly form a wall, and brambles that slice his skin. His pirate shirt provides no protection, as it shredded right off his body a half mile back.

He stumbles in the bright sunshine, shielding his eyes against the sun and the sun's reflection off his fish belly-pale torso. After a moment, his eyes catch up with the rest of him, and he finds himself in a small clearing.

The noise is louder now, as though the train is headed straight for him, rushing at him through the trees. He shoves to his feet, balancing on one leg, trying to place its direction.

Movement catches his eye, and he glances down between his feet. A train chugs across the clearing on nearly invisible rails, perfectly miniaturised. Ben steps around the train, dropping to his belly to peer more closely at it. It comes straight for his nose, its toots and chugs much bigger than its size accounts for, a red engine puffing steam and one passenger car.

A passenger sits in the last row, staring out at the passing giant-sized scenery with a bored expression.

"You!" Ben's surprise bursts out of him, his breath a gust of wind against the train.

He sees her eyes widen a bit at what must have been a thundering voice, at the sight of his mountainous face staring back at her.

The train passes his head. He scrambles to follow it, but his foot catches on something and he belly flops

right back down to the ground.

"Shit." Shaking his head, he pushes himself halfway up, trying to keep the train in sight.

He freezes. Dozens of figures wielding pitchforks, axes, and sledgehammers surround the clearing. They advance toward him, shaking the rope they'd tripped him with.

Of course, they're all Smurf-sized, same as the train, but he doesn't want to step on one.

"Uh, hello," Ben says. It's becoming apparent he has few other conversation starters in his repertoire.

"Giant!" says a Smurfette. "From whence have you come?"

Ben frowns, translating in his mind. "Just today, I think." When they stare at him without answering, he tries again, waving behind him. "I walked through the forest from the sea. I'm looking for a little girl."

They bristle. "Ye'll not be having any of our girls, ye devil!" shouts one person-ette, who then charges at Ben with a high-pitched roar. Ben jumps to his feet, only to find a pitchfork wobbling out of his toes.

"Merak! Retreat!" the Smurfette yells.

Ben pulls the fork out of his toes and offers it to the raging mini-warrior. "I'm only giving it back to you if you promise not to use it."

Merak makes no such promise, but he snatches the fork back and returns to his place in the ranks.

"I don't want to steal any of your women," Ben says. "I, uh, come in peace."

An older guy – Papa, perhaps? – steps forward. "What is it you seek, wandering one?"

"A girl – a *giant* girl," Ben says as hammers and forks

rise again. "Maybe flying a *giant* kite or a *giant* glider? I saw her crash in the forest."

The apple-high tribe look around at each other, but no one says anything.

"Yeah, I didn't think so," Ben mutters.

"Perhaps you should seek an audience with our queen," the Smurfette says.

*Of course*, Ben thinks. The queen. The queen is always and forever the only one who can help. Or the king, or some kind of witch, and then they always wind up to be one and the same.

Aloud, he says, "The queen's at the castle, I guess."

They all nod, their faces stony.

"When you approach the queen, you must tell her immediately that you hail from foreign lands. She is very eager to hear tales of other worlds."

Ben nods, then frowns at the smirks that pop up on several of the tiny faces. "I guess I can't take a cab, can I?"

Again, the silent uncomprehending stares.

"Is it okay, you know, if I go now?"

They move aside to give him an open path. "Tread not upon our village," Papa Smurf warns him. "And move quickly, lest I change my mind."

Ben starts to laugh at this, but his toe throbs and he decides not to be an idiot. Watching carefully where he walks, he heads out after the long-gone train.

\*\*\*

Lilly's feet keep pacing, one in front of the other, and another, and another, but it's getting harder to push them forward every time. Once she watched them move backward, completely out of her control.

She wants to sit down, to lie down, thinks about it with every step. She could

rest, sleep, drift away to a place where her body is not trickling away from her. But something (*finger bones are so little, Lilly*) in the back of her mind keeps her from falling into unconsciousness (*all I have to do is twist. See?*).

Her ears are filled with a whooshing noise, an emptiness that leaves them with only input from the cycles of her body. Thump-whoosh, thump-whoosh, thump-whoosh, as her heart labours to push blood through. She wonders what her blood would look like now, if it came out of her. Would it be red, red and true and solid, once it exits her ghostly, ineffective form? Or would it be a pale dilute pink, washed out by her growing weakness?

Thump-whoosh, she whispers. Thump-whoosh, thump-whoosh, thump-whoosh clack. Thump-whoosh clack clack clack. And a whistle.

Slowly, the external noises impress themselves upon her. Not her heart, riveted with metal like the bots of Hal's world. Not her life energy steaming out, escaping from the kettle of her body.

She blinks, trying to clear her vision. A fog clouds the path ahead, but she can't wave it away, and she realises there is no fog; her eyes are starting to lose their grip on what they see. It's hard, however, to miss the massive form slowing to a stop at the edge of a crude village, halting in front of a simple, bare platform. A train.

She tells her legs to run. She shouts at them to run. She pumps her arms, swimming through the air that has become so heavy. But her words come out as whispers, and her muscles fail to fire. She trudges toward the wooden platform, reaching the edge just as the engine heats up again, and the chug-chug-chug drills anew through her ears.

No. She is so very close, so close to moving faster, to getting somewhere, anywhere, even if it is only a different nowhere from the one she is in. But she could not run to meet the train; she certainly can't run to catch it.

Finally, she allows her body to collapse. The rhythm is gone, her heart no longer beating a staccato on her eardrums. She will lie here until she floats away, a little girl who once existed but left nothing behind.

"Oh, shit."

The voice is not a train.

"Hey, are you all right? Can you hear me?"

Lilly's eyes strain to focus. A person-shape leans over her, long rainbows of hair cascading from a shadowed face.

"Hey, kid," the face says, and Lilly can see the black hole that must be a mouth forming the words. "Hey, kid, are you alive?"

The form moves, reaching a tendril out, and Lilly has the tingling sensation of flesh passing right through her.

"Fuck me!" The tendril yanks back. As it does, the face blurs. Face? Lilly cannot remember what that word means.

Another tingle. The voice, softer now. "Kid, you don't look so good. Flutter your eyelashes if you're not dead."

Lilly blinks. She isn't sure if that counts as a flutter, but the face seems to understand it, for she — it's a she, a girl, like Lilly — speaks again.

"Okay, you're alive. Are you close to dead?"

Lilly thinks. Alive, dead. Black, white. Round, square. These are opposites, things that have different faces looking at them from different sides. She is alive, for she cannot remember truly being in any other state. But something else, something dark and frightening, is so very near.

She blinks again.

"Christ. Okay." More tingles. *I'm not real anymore*, Lilly thinks, and wants to tell the girl. Her mouth moves, and a whisper of air comes out.

"Oh, hey, sure you are, *jita*. You're just a bit...transparent is all. I've seen worse."

Lilly believes her. Not just wants to believe her, but believes her.

Her whisper comes more easily now. "He's there. I'm scared. I tried to stay here...tried..."

The face frowns, even as the tendrils — hands — move soothingly over her body. The tingles are stronger now.

The rainbow-girl shifts, moving to sit behind Lilly's head. Something happens, and Lilly can feel the girl's warmth surrounding her head, her neck, her face, like the sun pouring over her. The rainbow-girl asks her no more questions, but begins to sing, soft and low, her lullaby easing the emptiness in Lilly's ear:

*"Vamos a la vuelta,  
del toro torojil  
a ver a la rana  
comiendo perejil..."*

\*\*\*

CHEESE-TASTIC, THAT IS.

Emotional. Some people appreciate emotion in stories.

SURE. MENOPAUSAL WOMEN WHOSE HUSBANDS HAVE LEFT THEM FOR  
YOUNGER WOMEN.

OOH, HIT A NERVE, DID I?

Not all stories must involve faeces.

JUST THE GOOD ONES. HAS IT BEEN LONG ENOUGH?

Long enough for what?

FOR THE STORY TO PROGRESS?

\*\*\*

"How do you get it so many colours?"

Amelia feels a tug on one of her locks. Lilly is awake, pulling a turquoise dreadlock through her fingers. Her body is more solid than it has been since Amelia found her; she can feel the weight of the little girl's head resting on her folded legs.

"Can you see me?" Lilly asks.

"Yep. Glad you're back. I'm Amelia."

"Hi, Amelia. I'm Lilly." She sits up, letting Amelia's hair go.

"Lilly...you wouldn't be related to a scrawny guy named Ben, would you?"

Lilly's face brightens, solidifies even, at the sound of her brother's name. "Yes! He's my brother. Have you seen him? I've been looking for him, but I get so tired, and then I lay down to rest and I have nightmares and I fade..."

Nightmares? Amelia hasn't dreamed once since she entered the stone at the top of the hill, since Tal called her to him. She puts the thought aside. "I was in a different world, and he was lost there—"

"Like I'm lost here! I had a friend, but a crow got him."

Amelia blinks, but continues. "Yeah, so. I helped him get out, just because he was such a pest. But when he was gone, I felt like...I dunno. I wanted out too."

Lilly grins. "He grows on you. Like moss on your teeth that your tongue keeps looking for after you've brushed it away."

Amelia cocks her head and studies the girl, full of happiness and life where moments ago she'd nearly disappeared entirely. "You're a weird kid."

"You're the one with five different colours in your hair."

"Fair enough." Amelia shrugs. "Anyway, I got out of that world a different way, caught the train, and was passing through this crazy giant land, where the tree trunks were all the size of houses. And then there's this *face*, looking in at me, bigger than a fracking cruise ship. And it's him, he's here. I jammed the emergency stop lever, but it didn't stop till I got here."

"And you saw me." Lilly flops on her back again, revelling in the grass tickling her re-fleshed body. "You'll help me get to him, then?"

"Sure, I guess." The little girl goes on, telling her about the castle, and Hal, and something about strange dreams and fingers.

"Hey, kid, we've got a lot of road to cover." Amelia gets to her feet. "You can tell me all about your pet frog while we walk, okay?"

"He wasn't my pet. He's a prince." But Lilly stands up and falls into step next to Amelia, unaffected by how near death she so recently was, and by how near death they might now possibly be.

\*\*\*

Ben trudges on, wishing he'd kept the scraps from his pirate shirt – hell, wishing he'd carried blankets and fires ashore from the ship. The ankle-stabbers hadn't bothered to tell him he'd have to cross tundra to get to the castle.

Of course, it's only 60 degrees, but it doesn't take much to send a California kid into hypothermia.

"Haven't you got enough sense to wear clothing? What are you, some kind of hedonist?"

Ben shivers to a halt. The voice is near, but he can't see who spoke to him. He cranes his neck at the trees that have crowded in on him.

"Who's there?"

"Who's not here. He's on first. It's just me."

Ben frowns. "Hello?"

"I think we're past niceties. After all, I'm only waiting for you to die so I can have a snack." Throaty, wheezing laughter now.



A shadow flits in the trees. Ben backs up, wrapping his arms around his chest. "I'm not dying."

"Yet."

The shadow flickers to Ben's right, and almost immediately again to his left.

"Have you ever tried human meat? It's a bit greasy, but if you can get it warm it's so much better than duck or pheasant."

"I think you're full of shit," Ben says. "If you were going to eat me, you'd have done it already."

"I like my entertainment before my meal."

No shadow, but the voice is moving, circling, getting closer and closer each time it speaks.

A small, sharp scratch on his head. His bowels nearly void themselves. Ben drops to his back on the ground, twisting to stare up the tree trunk above him, expecting a mountain lion or bear or a forest shark with claws.

From a small hollow in the tree trunk, a squirrel pokes its inquisitive nose.

It holds one disturbingly human-like finger to its mouth, shushing him. Ben lies there, trying to make his breaths silent, clenching his muscles, and failing rather miserably. The squirrel points a finger. At first, the stupid boy assumes the squirrel is trying to communicate to him – via charades, apparently – about where the predator is. Ben starts trying to inch his way around the other side of the tree.

"Where are you going, stupid?" the squirrel whispers.

"I don't want to be eaten," Ben replies.

"Then go to the castle, moron. There's an entrance there."

"Where?"

"What am I, a fucking rabbit? Look where I'm pointing, you idiot."

Ben blinks at the squirrel's unwavering little claw-finger for several moments. Then he cranes his neck back to look behind and above him. Across the clearing is another large tree, its trunk twisting and turning and diving amongst its own branches and leaves. About ten feet up is a hole – definitely big enough for a squirrel. Ben's not sure it will fit a teenage boy.

"Seriously?"

"You've got about ten seconds before that a-hole drops you. See how he's gone quiet? You'll be lucky to make it to the tree. GO!"

The shouted word, after so many intense whispers, catapults the prone boy into action. He springs off the squirrel's tree, using his legs as pistons against the trunk, propelling himself halfway across the clearing before he's fully managed to upright himself and get his legs underneath him.

He's running, trying to plan out the footholds and handholds that will get him up to the hole the quickest, when a crunchy thump sounds behind him. The predator laughs long and slow, almost a growl.

Adrenaline surges, and his legs spin like the Roadrunner dashing across the desert. Ben launches himself at the twisty tree, forgetting all about his pre-planned route. Instead, he monkeys straight up.

As soon as his hands hit the dark, empty space, he heaves himself through it. It's a tight fit. He sucks in his breath, twists his torso, and he's free, sliding through the darkness, down—

—and stopping short as something catches his right foot.

"Thought you could get away, did you? Molasses moves faster than you, boy. Hmm. Molasses. You might taste nice broiled in a bit of that dark sweetness."

Ben's left leg flails, then finally stretches upward, reaching for the caught right foot. He pushes his toes against the heel of his shoe, and it slip-slides off his foot, leaving the predator with nothing for dinner but a tired old tennis shoe.

The predator's growl echoes down the inside of the tree, following Ben as he drops hard into an even harder surface. It's a graded slope, and he slides down it head-first. He strains to see through the darkness, for obstacles or a light marking the tunnel's end. He expects something will soon hit him in the face, that he will drop suddenly into an enormous pit (hopefully filled with water or some other cushion-y substance), or that he will emerge into a room filled with spikes and/or lava.

He does indeed reach the end of the chute, and drops through its maw like a wet sack of cabbage. He does not drop into spikes or lava; instead, he drops straight into a vat of laundry. He sputters up out of the water, soap stinging his eyes, and finds himself in a room full of be-robed ROUSES, all of whom are pointing brooms and conical hats at him.

"Uh. Hello."

\*\*\*

Amelia insists upon walking behind the fragile-bodied girl, if for no other reason than that it helps her to keep an eye on Lilly's condition, which is fading again. Lilly has forgotten Amelia is even there. The dirt road stretches out in front of her, winding through the thickening villages surrounding the castle, and at the same time the

tiny room she shares with her foster-siblings boxes her in. She can feel Rob tracing the blade of his pocketknife across her skin, the throbbing in her pinky fingers, the curving drip of blood from the slices he's made on the underside of her arm.

She focuses her eyes on the road, on the sound of iron-clad wagon wheels tumbling over the dirt track. Amelia's voice outpaces Rob's gleeful whispers.

"Lilly, come on, over here with me. Get behind me." Amelia tries to push Lilly to the side of the road, but her hands drift through the girl's torso. "Seriously, kid, wake the hell up. I don't know this guy coming, and we're so close to the castle I don't want to drum up trouble."

"Hullo, there, honey." Not a guy holding the mule's reins. A woman of Dolly Parton proportions pulls the wagon to a stop next to them. "On your way to the big house on the hill, then?"

"Almost there," Amelia says with a faint smile.

"Riding's quicker, if you want to climb on up here with me," the woman belts. "Why walk when you can ride with company, eh?"

Amelia considers. Women with disproportionately large chests weren't typically dangerous, but then you never know, do you? For all Amelia knows, Farmer Dolly might have a half dozen armed and tumescent rapists hiding beneath a tarp in her wagon.

"Tumescent, eh? You read a lot, don't you, girlie?" Farmer Dolly laughs so hard at Amelia's expression her chest nearly pops right out of her blouse. "Ain't from around here, are ya? Locals know better than to have open thoughts around any woman with more than a handful of tit. Comes with the package, girlie. My guess is you ain't got the gift."

Amelia hunches her shoulders, hiding what little "gifts" she has. "You have telepathic boobs?" she asks, cocking a skeptical eyebrow.

"Well, it ain't my ass that's collectin' your transmissions," Farmer Dolly replies. "I'm all alone, and I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me. Your imaginary friend can come, too. Hop on."

Cautiously, Amelia climbs aboard the wagon. She watches Lilly float/clamber into the bed behind her, knowing she's helpless to pull the girl up.

"And it's Gretchen," the woman says as she snaps the reins. "Don't know who Dolly is, and I ain't a farmer, either. I'm a weaver. 'At's why you've got such a comfy seat."

Gretchen is true to her word, and doesn't harm a hair on either of their heads, though she talks their ears off all the way to the castle keep. She rolls her wagon right past the perfunctory guards manning the gate with a "Hullo, boys! Have you saved some for me?" and pulls up on the backside of the bustling market stalls lining the outer courtyard.

Amelia thanks her for the ride, stretching her limbs.

"No need to thank me." Gretchen pats the pillows of flesh mounding over her blouse. "You'll keep me in business for a while, all the spinning round that goes on in your head."

"What?"

"Your story, girl. Didn't you have a look at what your ass was resting on?"

"Blankets..." Amelia trails off as she peers over Lilly's shoulder. Not blankets. Tapestries, but not tapestries. They are blanket sized, with what at first glance seemed like abstract noise, hash marks and strokes and vague shapes that resembled hieroglyphs. But if she lets her eyes settle on the fabric, the symbols float up out of it, drifting to her and coding together to form a story that seeps into her pores, filling her mind with images and people and events. It was like smelling an orange and remembering the last lunch her mother had ever packed for her.

Amelia steps back, rips her eyes away from the story rugs. "You can't just take stories right from people's heads."

"Says who? Stories don't belong to nobody, 'cepting they belong to everybody. You think you own your story? What percentage? What about that ghost girl you're hauling around — how much of your story is her story? You been with me for a couple hours now. How much of your story is my story?" Gretchen laughs, her bosom flopping. "You best give it a rest, girlie, and go on about your own business. Leave me to mine."

"Are we at the castle?" Lilly asks, her voice whispery and faint. "Is the queen here?"

Amelia narrows her eyes at the chesty story-thief. "Yeah, Lilly, we're at the fricking castle. Let's go, kid." She reaches out to take the girl's arm, her palm slicing right through it before she remembers herself.

"Consider it payment for the ride, girlie," Gretchen calls after her as they walk (or in Amelia's case, stomp) away.

Amelia and Lilly slip into the keep well enough, the guards only giving them a

cursory glance as they pass. People dressed in bright robes and bizarre hats — one is shaped from goat horns into a tree, complete with treehouse — mill about the great hall. But she only catches brief glimpses of them, amidst sparks and strange lights, as a very tall man with very slick hair stops them before they can enter.

"Names, ranks, and parishes, please."

"Amelia. And this is Lilly." Amelia pauses. "We're not from here."

"Whose emissaries are you?" He's not even looking at her. He's perched on a very tall stool in front of a very tall podium, upon which lies a book that would make the OED cry with shame. Every few seconds a page turns, apparently of its own volition.

"No one's. We're, I mean, we need to ask the queen for help."

Amelia pegs him for a bureaucrat on his laugh alone. "My dear, if everyone got to see the queen simply because they were not bright enough to work their lives out on their own, the kingdom would fall apart as no one would be anywhere doing any work whatsoever."

"Seriously, guy, you don't even know what the problem is—"

Lilly's crying rises like the faint notes of a distantly remembered melody over their voices, over the din of the hall full of supplicants. Amelia immediately drops to her knee next to the girl, who gives her a solid wink. The bureaucrat leans over his giant book to peer down at them.

"Hurts..." Lilly says. "Amelia? Are you there? I can't...I can't see you anymore."

"I can see you, *hija*. You're right here, in the castle, right with me."

The girl blinks, pain washing across her face. "A castle," she repeats. "I'm in a castle, where there's a queen who's going to help me. Castle..." Her gaze drifts north to the tall bureaucrat as it smooths out into the here and now. "You don't look like a queen. Have you seen my brother? He's looking for me..."

The bureaucrat watches the girl's body flicker, then turns to Amelia. "What curse is this?"

Amelia shakes her head. "I don't know what her deal is. I met her brother before, and he's here, in this world. I need to get her to him, that's all I know. Think the queen can do the trick?"

He rears his head back. "Young lady, the queen does not involve herself in *tricks*. The queen is the premiere witch of this entire region. I believe if you so much

as mention the word 'trick' in her hearing, she will have your head for basic ingredients."

"Chill, buck-o. It's just an expression. Can we see her?"

He makes a mark in his book. "I suppose you can wait in there with everyone else."

"In case you hadn't noticed, this is sort of urgent." Amelia waves to Lilly's faint outline.

"Yes, yes, all right. I'll make a note of it. Go."

\*\*\*

Ben finds himself being handed from one ROUS to another, dancing a jig with each before one hands him a broom and waves his creepy rat-hands around (they look like large versions of the squirrel's hands, and Ben wonders if suddenly everyone has rodent-slash-human hands, and checks his own to ensure they are still fully human). Ben waves the broom awkwardly and dashes to the open door, taking the broom with him.

He climbs the spiralling corridor to the great hall. It's full of people in various stages of drunkenness and undress. He's grateful they all look at least human; he's had enough of rodents.

"How d'you do?" asks a man near him wearing no pants and a wizard's hat. "Have you come to join our revels?"

"Revels? No, I'm looking for..."

The man waves his flask, hushing Ben. "Ev'r'one's looking for something, young sir! Here is where you leave those worr...were...wohr...troubles behind!"

"I don't want to leave them behind."

"It's a shit broom you've got there. No better than a laundry mouse." The amused voice comes from behind, soft and sultry. Ben turns to find a woman in a leotard composed of flames. "I hope you can do more than sweep floors with it."

Ben looks hopelessly at the broom. "Uh, it's new."

The woman drags her fingertips over her torso from hip to breast to shoulder. Sparks fly out, showering over Ben and his laundry broom. Its bristles smoulder.

The woman and the man both laugh, and share a drink from his flask.

"I don't mean to crash your party," Ben says, "but I'm looking for my sister. Is there someone in charge here?"

"I don't think we have sisters here," the woman says as they both drift away. "So dull," she comments to the no-pants-man.

He tries again. Everyone is generous with wine, and jokes about his now-charred broom, but no one answers a direct question.

Frustrated, he makes his way to the outer edge of the hall, trailing his fingertips along the cold stone. Until the stone abruptly shifts, and what lies under his hand is cool, smooth glass. A mirror. The darkness and the crowd made it hard to see, but now he can them out, mirrors dotted all around the hall, making it seem much bigger than it actually is. He stares at his reflection, flickering with shadows from firelight and bursting spells around the room. He seems so ordinary next to all of them, with no sparkles, no hat, no purposeful nudity. Just a burned broom that he tosses into the corner in disgust.

A distant figure in the mirror catches his eye. Small, also not sparkly or glowing, her dark hair pulled into a messy ponytail.

Lilly.

Ben whirls, but she's nowhere in the crowd behind



him. He turns back to glance at the mirror, and she's definitely there. Someone turns to speak to her – not someone. It's Amelia, with rainbow-coloured hair and striped tights.

He races away from the mirror, shoving through bodies and hats and swirling spells. "Lilly!" he yells. "Lilly, I'm right here! Amelia, can you hear me?"

But the only response is laughter, and some grumbles from people he's knocked aside.

"Keep it down, kid."

"Whoever she is, she don't want to talk to you. Either of 'em."

"Hey, pal, slow down. Who've you lost?"

Ben stops at the calm voice and the hand on his shoulder. The man's face is veined and red, but his eyes are clear and he stands upright without assistance.

"My sister. I saw her in the mirrors."

"Oh, aye, the mirrors. She's not here, I'm afraid."

"But I can see her."

The man shakes his head. "You ever hear anything about mirrors?"

"What, you mean like if you break one you get seven years' bad luck?"

"Sure, sure. And more." The man leads him to the nearest mirror. Sure enough, in a far corner of the room, Ben can see Lilly's reflection as she sits cross-legged on the floor. "Reflections aren't one-way things. They're doors. This isn't the only castle. The girl you're seeing, she's in that other place. You've got to get over there if you want to find her."

"How?" Ben squinted at the glass.

"Just walk right through." And the man walks right

off.

Ben presses his palm against the glass. Somehow, he doesn't think it can be that easy. He runs his fingers all around the mirror, seeking the edge, or even a latch to pull. Nothing. The mirror is melded into the castle wall, as though the wall itself has melted under extreme heat and solidified into a perfect glossy surface.

"Shit. Indiana Jones. Leap of faith."

Ben pulls back from the mirror, focusing all his energy, his will, his soul on the sight of his little sister in that other room in that other castle, waiting for him to step across to her.

Clenching his teeth, he strides forward, straight into that other room, mirror be damned.

Be damned it is. Glass crashes around Ben as he drops to his knees, shielding his face with his arms. The mirror drops, leaving only a space of castle wall behind it.

Silence follows in the wake of the tinkling crash. Then, as though everyone took a breath at the same time, laughter washes over him.

Within moments, witches and wizards are lined up, each one of them with the best advice on how not to get through to the other side.

\*\*\*

"Lilly! Oh, I've finally found you. I knew you'd make it here."

"Who the hell are you?" Amelia steps in front of the girl and folds her arms, glaring down at the talking toad with a tiny crown on his head.

The toad puffs up his chest. "I would ask the same thing of you, miss."

"Hal!" Lilly pushes through Amelia's legs, dropping to her hands and knees in front of the amphibian. "What happened to you? Where are all your gears?"

"It was terrible," the toad sighs. "Can you believe she turned me into a flesh frog prince? I eat insects now, and I need water, and I *poop*."

"Who turned you into a frog?" Amelia says.

"Not a frog." Lilly giggles. "He was always a frog."

"Frog-*prince*, actually."

"He's my friend," Lilly says. "He was a robot frog, but now he's not. I lost him, and now I found him. Hiya, Hal."

"Hiya, kid. You don't look so good."

"No," Lilly replies. "Amelia helps me, though."

"Wait, wait, wait." Amelia drops to kneel, sitting on her heels. "Who turned you into a real frog, and why?"

"I was always real," Hal huffs. At Amelia's glare, he says, "It was the queen. She found great amusement in it."

"The queen!" Lilly claps, though no sound emerges. "We need to see her. To find Ben, remember?"

"I remember. I know how to get to her. But I don't know how much she'll actually help." His wide mouth quirks into half a frown.

"Can't help but try," Amelia says, scooping him up despite his *ribbits* of protest. "Come on."

Hal directs them through a side door in the hall, barely big enough for Amelia to squeeze through sideways. She has to crouch down fifty feet of corridor paralleling the great hall, and she's just launched into a groan about cramps in her thighs when Hal shushes her.

"She's just through there. Best to walk in like you belong there. She might just buy it."

Amelia eyes the simple wooden door. It doesn't look much like it would lead to a private audience with a queen. "Here goes. Lilly, you ready?"

The girl nods quietly, her eyes once again dazed and distant.

Amelia pushes at the door and strides through it, Hal still in her other hand. She nearly stumbles at the scene before her, but catches herself and keeps walking, approaching the only person in the room who can be the queen.

The queen is close to seven feet tall, desert red, with the head and tail of a dog. She wears nothing, though her fur glistens in the lamplight richer than any mink stole. Dogs, wolves, coyotes, and a couple of hyenas lounge at her feet, occasionally offering their heads for a pat. Young human girls in gauzy clothing lie amongst them, napping, petting, brushing, feeding.

At the other end of the room, two boys flip and dance in an acrobatic display of strength, coordination, and skill. They use one another's bodies to leap high in the air, tumbling, writhing, stretching their limbs into gravity-defying displays. They are painted — or magicked — with glowing colours that gleam in the semi-darkness. With each movement the boys make, the colours form shapes, images, words that flicker and mutate, reflecting and informing the dance.

Amelia watches them, stunned and awed into silence. Until a voice breaks through to her.

"Who might you be, with your pathetic toad and your ghostly shadow?"

The queen has moved, completely without sound, and now towers over Amelia, blinking down her long nose.

No words come to Amelia for a very long moment.

Then Lilly offers a far-off whimper. Several canine heads rise and zero in on her, their ears cocked.

"I'm Amelia," she whispers. She swallows, and finds her grown-up voice. "I've come to request your help on behalf of this little girl."

The queen sniffs at Lilly. "Little girl, you say? Smells like death to me."

Lilly's whimper draws out into snuffles, and Hal blurps.

"Close, your uh, majesty. It's why we've come to you. Something strange is happening to her, and I'm trying to get her to her brother. He's here somewhere, in the forest—"

"Here, there, it really doesn't matter," the queen says. She retreats several steps, and Amelia's lungs find room to expand. "If I choose to help you, I help you. If I don't, it doesn't matter if the boy is in the next room. What do you offer me?"

Amelia stares blankly.

"Well?" the queen asks. "Even these two imbecile boys thought to create a story through their acrobatics in return for forgiving their father's debt. You're asking for much more than they."

Amelia looks back at the boys, at their antics reaching a crescendo, the glowing painted story tumbling from their bodies in frantic images.

"Stories," Hal whispers. "They have power."

Even in her own cozy little corner, in FærLife, once you created yourself at the centre of a story, you created your life, your setting, your world in the virtual environment. The weaver, she was a psychic, but all she'd done was take bits and

pieces of Amelia's thoughts and weave them together to form a tale, a tale she sold on and lived on. Stories are power.

But what story?

"I know," the queen says suddenly. "It's the perfect cast. Play me the story of the frog prince. You know, the one the princess finds in the well."

Amelia looks at Hal, who shrugs.

"Oh, no," Lilly says, barely audible.

"The little shadow will play the princess. The big crazy girl will represent the king and queen. The frog I think we know." Chuffs fill the room from her pack.

"Somebody get those boys and their deadbeat father out of my castle."

The hyenas leap to attention, each grasping a boy's wrist between dripping jaws, leading them crying out of the chamber.

Amelia suddenly feels the need to pee. "Lilly, do you know the story?"

"Yes, but—"

"It means finding your brother. Focus, and you can do it."

"But I can't!" Lilly's breath comes in great sobs.

"Lilly, you're an orphan. You can act."

"It's not that." Lilly reaches out one faint finger to the worried Hal. It dips over his back, then drops straight through him, down, down through Amelia's hand and out the other side. "At the end of the story the princess picks him up and throws him against a wall. Even if I could pick Hal up, I could never dash him against the wall."

*Shit, Amelia thinks. Giant piles of steaming shit.*

\*\*\*

You know, this is turning out to be quite fun. I don't remember ever telling a story about acrobat boys, or psychic story weavers before.

I'VE BEEN TELLING YOU FOR AGES YOU WERE GETTING STALE. THINK ANYBODY WANTS THOSE "LIFE-LESSON" TALES ANYMORE? FORGET IT. DEATH, MAYHEM, RAW SEWAGE. THAT'S COMEDY GOLD, I'M TELLING YOU.

Except, I can't remember which castle I'm supposed to be in. Was it right or left?

BEATS ME. I NEVER LEARNED THE DIFFERENCE.

\*\*\*

Ben sits cross-legged in front of another mirror. Every so often he swipes the blood away from the cut in

his forehead that just won't give up.

"Knock three times."

"Spin widdershins thrice, cluck your tongue, and offer obeisance to the queen."

"Show it yer pecker. Works every time for me."

He'd tried every piece of ridiculous advice, even the last. He horrified a gaggle of girls passing the mirror on the other side.

Tears creasing his eyes, he drops his forehead to the mirror, palms flat against it.

The mirrors require magic, you see. Not a standard spell, nothing anyone can take note of and pass on to the next fool who wants to cross over. Sometimes it's a chant, sometimes it's a bit of a dance. Everyone's magic is different. Just like everyone opens a door just a little bit differently from everyone else, so everyone's access through these portals is just a bit different. Trying someone else's method only gets you sliced skin and blood in your eyes.

It's my favorite part, watching them try to cross. Most don't bother; most don't see any real reason to leave the constant orgy that is the great hall in the left-hand castle (or is it right-hand? It depends on where you stand, I guess). Some give up after a while, figuring it's not worth obsessing over. Those who figure it out usually get through by accident; the lucky ones remember exactly what they did that got them across.

He can't see Lilly anymore. She exited the great hall on her side with Amelia some time ago. He knows where she is, though, knows if he can only cross over she'll be close enough to touch, and he knows he's got nothing left that he can do.

So he sits, his face and palms pressed against the glass, occasionally muttering idiocies like "Avada break-glassicus" as the blood drip-drop-drips to the floor in front of him.

He can't remember the last time he ate. Time moves strangely in the 'while, as does food in the gut. He has no idea if food eaten here even goes into his real body; he still maintains an odd sense of dreaming, wondering if his body is lying under an overpass. If he finally gave in to the temptations of the street and poked a needle in his veins. If he has already given up on Lilly, but his subconscious hasn't gotten the message yet.

The longer he sits, the more words fall out of his mouth. I save them to stitch together one day: Sister. Died. Wish. Game. Stupid. Hungry. Shit. Never should've. Sepulveda. Miss.

Amelia. Her name comes up almost as much as Lilly's. After a while, the names alternate, streaming out like a mantra. Amelia, Lilly. Amelia, Lilly, Amelia, Lilly... AmeliaLilly Amelilly Amelillelialilly...

His tongue stumbles. He rolls his forehead over the glass, chortling.

"Once upon a time," he murmurs. "Once upon a time, she led me to the edge of her world, and she asked me to tell her a tale. And I stumbled and I fumbled, but I reached back, and I saw you. I saw you in that ratty green T-shirt, a scrap for a belt, with a cardboard sword as you challenged that old pirate and saved the Indian princess. I thought it would bring me to you.

"Once upon a time," he repeats. "Once upon a time. Once upon a time, there was a boy who failed to take care of his sister, and so she was taken away. He hoped she

was happy, but really he couldn't live without her. Without her. Without her he was just a guy with no future. So he looks for her, and he looks for her, even though he knows he shouldn't. And every time he's close to finding her she slips away again.

"Once upon a time...Once, twice, a million times upon a million times and no one ever gets anywhere...once..."

"Once upon a time, a little girl lost her parents. She was a very lucky little girl, for her older brother vowed to take care of her, and to never be parted from her as long as she lived." The voice is soothing, cool, almost motherly. Ben blinks, wiping the sticky blood from his eyes. The mirror is gone, though he still sits on the stone floor, and the party-goers are gone, and the lights are gone. He simply sits in a dim space, strangely warm, across from her. Her position reflects his, though not his pain, not his fear. Her face is soft, but her eyes are far away.

She continues, and he is lulled by her lilting voice. "But her brother could not control all things. The elders of their village did not believe he could care for her, so they took her away, and gave her to a family that agreed to care for her. The boy was saddened, and spent his days wandering the forest, missing his sister but hoping she was happy and well-fed."

Ben's throat closes, but he cannot drop his gaze from her soft face.

"The girl's new family quickly became a third family, and a fourth, as times were hard, and the village elders believed it was better for everyone to take care of her than the one who loved her most. Finally, she came to a family that convinced the village elders they loved her, and would care for her forever. They were not rich, but they tried very hard to love and care for all their children, and took in many who had no homes or family of their own."

Ben feels a thread of relief wind through him. She'd been safe, then, protected. Loved even.

But the Storyteller is not finished. She never is. "One day, a terrible thing happened. The girl's adopted family took in a new brother, one who seemed to be so very much like the brother she had loved and lost. He was smart and sweet and funny, and everyone loved him. All the children slept in the same room, as their house was very small, and for the first few nights after their new brother joined them they all slept



a little easier. He was older, and bigger, and would help take care of them."

Ben itches at the thought of this wonderful boy reading stories to his sister, hugging her, advising her about life and school and bullies and teachers. It should have been him. He should have been with her.

"But not long after their new brother joined them, he began to show his true self. One by one he discovered their fears; he listened to their whimpers as they dreamed, knew each of their monsters. In the night, their beloved brother rose and visited each of them, whispering monsters into their dreams. When they woke he found their waking weaknesses and twisted them as well. In the daytime he was the most wonderful brother they'd ever known, and their parents held him up as something they should all aspire to. But in the night, he visited fear upon them, over and over and over, leaving no marks but the constant terror."

"No," Ben says. "They wouldn't let that happen. Lilly was safe, she was safe." He wraps his arms around himself, his chest caving in.

"All the children suffered. But the little girl suffered the worst. For she welcomed her evil brother's tortures; if he was torturing her he could not torture the others. Her true brother had poured so much love into her that it protected her for a very long time, and her evil brother could not find her true fear."

Ben rocks. He wants to run, to scream, to choke the Storyteller until the tale that is ripping him apart ceases to exist. But he does none of these; he must hear all of it, if only to visit the evil brother's tortures upon himself.

"The evil brother grew increasingly frustrated with the little girl. When she did not reveal her nightmares, he hurt her, cut her, as he had never dared to do with the others."

A groan shudders through Ben. How much had he hurt her?

"How much is he *still* hurting her?"

Ben's eyes snap to meet the Storyteller's. Her face is no longer slack or soft, and her eyes are as sharp upon his own as the slivers of glass that fell upon his head.

"You have escaped your world, boy, invited into this space of time by one who was drawn to the torment within you. Whether the invitation was meant to increase your torment or cease it, it never really matters. What matters is that the one you seek is here only sometimes, and barely ever any where. She is torn, being torn."

"What am I supposed to do?"

She shrugs. "I do not decide these things."

"Who does?"

A small, sad smile.

The light fades, pulling back from her face and form until Ben can no longer see if she is there or not. "Wait!" he cries. "Please, I don't know what to do."

No answer comes.

Ben drops his head over his knees, his chest heaving. He is heavy, his body weighted in every joint, overwhelming the slim capabilities of his muscles. Slowly, achingly, he comes to his hands and knees, turning around to examine the room. Behind him, he finds a mirror, and the sight of it brings tears of frustration.

Until he looks into it. His face is there, gruesome with blood. He has learned to see the difference between reflection and window after so many hours of staring at both, and through the portal that is the mirror he now sees a huge hall full of stumbling, laughing, riotous people. The drug- and magic-fuelled party of the castle on the other side of the mirror.

He's done it. He's through. He told the story that turned the magic enough to pull him to the other side. He's close to her; from here, only normal doorways and corridors separate him from the sister he's never been able to stop losing.

He runs.

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"She can't do it!" Amelia is screaming, her own voice tearing through her throat. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Lilly has tried so very hard. Hal sits on the edge of a well that the queen obligingly conjured up from the floor, a red ball resting next to him. But the story can go no further: Lilly has pushed all her reserves into being able to pick up her friend the former robot frog prince, for no result whatsoever. Time after time her hand slips right through him, bringing tears to her eyes, and barking laughter from the canines. The queen laughs loudest.

"You're killing her, you cruel fucking bitch." Amelia grabs the bucket that accompanied the ensorcelled well and dashes its contents at the queen.

The water douses the queen, spraying over her and her closest companions. Several yelp, and a low-throated growl emerges from the queen. Those not drenched burst into renewed fits of laughter, this time at their own companions and leader.

After a moment, the queen shakes herself, droplets fleeing her fur, and chuckles as well. "What kind of pathetic witch do you think I am, child, to be melted by a mere

bucket of water?"

Amelia tosses the empty bucket. It misses wide, and bounces off the skull of one of the hyenas, who barely notices. "You can take your witchery, and your broomsticks, and your wands, and your useless fucking deals and shove them up your hairy ass! You don't get to torture and kill a little girl for sport!"

"Who says she's alive? Who says she exists at all? My castle, my kingdom, my world. I say it, it exists. I don't, and...well, little girls who aren't even capable of kissing frog princes — or smashing them to bits against a wall — are very boring, story-wise. Why should I keep her at all?"

"Because you didn't create her."

Amelia whirls, and lets out a small squeak. Ben stands in the doorway, crusted in blood.

He steps into the room as the wolves and hyenas begin to whine at the scent of blood. "She's not yours. She's her own character, in her own story. She directs it, not you."

The queen sniffs. "She does a piss poor job of it."

Ben shrugs. "Doesn't matter. It's hers and hers alone."

If the queen has any arguments left, Ben doesn't wait for them. He barely nods to Amelia on his way to Lilly. The girl is reduced to a pale, colourless ball on the floor, shivering, barely visible at all. Ben quickly finds that he cannot gather her body to his, cannot hold her or comfort her.

"Lilly, it's Ben. I made it. You're safe." It's a lie, and the room knows it, but she doesn't hear him. Her eyes are lost, in some other while, some other place.

He looks back at Amelia. "What's happened to her?"

Amelia shakes her head. "She was like that when I found her. Whatever strength she's found, this fucking bitch has stripped away for a laugh. We thought she'd help, but..."

"I know." He sighs. "I know Lilly's story now, up to here. I think I know what's happening, but I don't know how to stop it."

"And...?" Hal pipes in. "Come on, you fool. She hasn't much time."

Ben starts at the noise from the amphibian. He raises an eyebrow at Amelia.

"He belongs to Lilly," she says.

"I belong to myself, thank you very much."

"Whatever." Ben wraps his body around the space occupied by Lilly's outline.

"When I came here, I came on a train. An old man who smelled a whole lot like this pack of dogs tricked me into coming here."

The queen drops to all fours, the corners of her mouth tipped in a smirk. The pack drifts restlessly around her.

Amelia murmurs, "I got on a train. I wanted to find my friend, someone I met online. He directed me here. He was...not the most trustworthy friend I've ever had."

The queen yips a laugh, and the pack echoes her short bark.

"How did Lilly get here?" Ben asks, his voice soft.

Amelia drops to sit next to him, keeping the increasingly more-dog-than-human queen in her line of sight. "I don't know. But she's not entirely...not one hundred percent *here*, you know. She keeps drifting away, like a dream."

The pack erupts into an escalating harmony of howls.

Amelia casts a sharp eye at the queen. "That's it, isn't it? Jesus."

Ben nods, staring down at his sister. She's grown so much since the last time he saw her, but he can see she's lost a great deal along the way. "This is what she looks like when she's having a nightmare. She's brought herself here on a dream, to escape. To escape the torture I abandoned her to."

"Bullshit."

Ben flinches.

"Bullshit. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and do something to help her."

"How?"

"Jesus, I really do have to do everything for you, don't I? Talk about *déjà vu*." Amelia shoves away from him and zeroes in on the queen. The queen perches on her haunches, her mouth open, her tongue lolling in the waves of her panting breaths.

"I'm good with dogs." Quick as a bird, Amelia pounces on the queen, rolling her on her back and pinning her there. "I own you. *Tal*."

The queen stops struggling. A low laugh rises from her, masculine and deep. "Oh, you're a smart gal, ain't you?"

"Feeling pretty fucking stupid it took me this long, actually."

"Let me up and I'll tell you a story."

"Tell me a story and I'll let you up."

"Fair enough, Ami." His back legs twitch. "Once upon a time there was a little girl who was all abandoned and alone—"

Amelia does not need to look to see the pain on Ben's face.

"—and along came a boy who took pleasure in her pain. But this little girl was special. She'd had love, sure, who hasn't? But she'd had love and stories, so very many stories, and she'd taken them and reshaped them and relived them and made them her own. So when the mean boy hurt her, she came to her stories, the stories she'd been given and created in love. She came here.

"But she couldn't travel to the 'while on dreams alone. A part of her, the part that is the most important, came to the world of stories. The other parts of her, the parts with a pulse, stayed and suffered the pain."

"Is she dying?"

"I look like a doctor? Ouch." His body rolls at Amelia's tightened grip. "Don't know. That part of her's not here, is it? The part of her that is here—"

"The important part. What, her soul?"

"You can call it a soul. Clichéd, but it works. Anyhow, that part's dying for sure. Got to put them back together to see if she'll live."

"Losing patience, Tal. How?"

His tail wags at the sound of his name. "You find the dream. You cross through, and you do it in enough time. Can I get up now?"

Amelia looks at Ben, who nods.

The Trickster leaps to his feet. He leads the pack out of the room, and leaves Amelia in a cloud of doggie-delivered stench like none she'd ever experienced.

"*Pendejo*," she calls after him.

## Chapter 6

### Swallowing the Tale's Tail

My teacher last year, Mrs. Liddell, had us write our own stories. We could write a story about ourselves, or we could make the whole thing up, just like real writers. A lot of kids wrote stories where they were superheroes. One kid wrote one about bad things that happened to him at home, but I knew better than that. He had to go to the principal, and see a head doctor, and he was sad even more than usual after that. Plus everyone treated him differently, and I already get treated weird enough, being an orphan and all. I wasn't about to say "hey, everybody, look at me! I'm an orphan, and wow, it really sucks!" any more than my general existence already did.

So I made up a story. I made up a story about a little girl who can travel to the places she reads about in books. Whenever she is sad, or bored, she can pick a book off the shelf and go there to see her friends, and have great adventures. It's not really a new story, I know that. Lots of better writers than me have done it, and I like those stories too. But I liked writing my own version of it, and Mrs. Liddell read it aloud in class, and one girl said she wished she'd written it, and lots of kids said they wished they could go into their favorite books whenever they wanted. Okay, most wished they could go into movies or TV shows, and then the class went all crazy talking about what it would be like if you could live in video games all the time, but that was all right. I still liked my story.

This story is a little bit different. It's still happening, see, and it's the first kind of story Mrs. Liddell said we could do, the one where it's about the person writing it. But it's also the second kind, because I'm making it up as I go along. It's kind of a brain-bender, and if it gets all dull and boring sometimes, it's only because it makes me tired to keep up with it all, so I have to take breaks sometimes. But anyway, I'll try to tell you what's happening as it's happening, and make it good and exciting.

There's another train, and at first I'm worried about that, because that's

how I got lost in the first place, but it's okay this time. It's okay because Ben is here, and whenever Ben is here I can't be lost, no matter where I am. Amelia's here too, which is good, because she saved me once, and it seems like she knows Ben and how dense he can be sometimes. Hal's in Amelia's pocket. She tried to put him in mine, saying "She carried him all this way — maybe it'll help her hold on if she can feel him there," but it didn't work. I'm a ghost all the way now, spooky and see-through. It'd be an awesome Halloween costume, except someone else would have to hold my trick-or-treat bag or I wouldn't get any candy at all.

The train goes through lots of places, and I try to notice a lot of things about them, to memorise them. It's helping me stay on the train with Ben and Amelia instead of going back there—

*—where there's pain, and fear, and his angry face bending over me in the dark. I don't know what he wants, what he wants me to do, what he wants me to say. He doesn't do this to the others. Only me. He's been waiting, he's been testing me, and now I've failed somehow, and oh-god-it-hurts—*

—both kneeling in front of me, shouting my name. Even Hal is croaking something to me. They do this a lot, to wake me up from the nightmares. They seem more scared than I do.

I'm awake now, and I watch the worlds roll by as Ben and Amelia discuss where we should get off the train. I think about all the places I've seen from the train, and from the time me and Hal decided to fly instead of ride the rails. The forests are dark and scary places, even when they're not, and I think every one is full of lions and tigers and bears, or maybe just wolves. Wolves are bad enough.

I think about Babbingen, where Hal says we should go. But no one thinks that's a good idea; they want something to do with dreams, and it turns out robots don't dream. It's weird, because they used to be people, but I guess they traded some things away when they got to live forever. I think if I could give away my nightmares, and never see that boy's face above mine again, I'd gladly give up all my other dreams too. But we're not going to Babbingen, not right now, anyway.

Ben asks Amelia what she thinks this dream world would look like. I like to listen to Amelia talk with her strange Spanish and Welsh accent.

"It's kind of like asking someone what they think heaven looks like, isn't it?" she says. "Everyone sees what they want to see. Streets paved with gold, god on a throne, some angels playing a harp orchestra. It's all your dead loved ones playing poker. How the hell would I know?"

Amelia doesn't care that I'm a kid who probably shouldn't hear bad words. Neither does Ben. That's normal world stuff, normal world with mommies and daddies and houses with picket fences. I guess they know I've never had that world, so why bother trying to pretend?

"I have one dream a lot," Ben is saying. "I think it might be a memory, you know, before our folks died. I'm in this house, in a really long corridor with all these closed doors on either side. I keep running and running to reach the end, but I can't pass a door without opening it to see what's on the other side. Only it's always dark, and I can't really see what's in the room."

Amelia rolls her eyes. "Everyone has that dream, dummy."

"What? Who?"

"Everyone. Hal, you ever dream about a hallway full of doors?" she asks, even though she knows robots don't dream.

"Sure," he says, even though he knows robots don't dream. "Never know where to go, always worried about something. Come on, boy. Don't you have anything more interesting?"

"There's this one about throwing a frog against a wall," Ben says sullenly. He never liked it when I made a friend other than him.

I'm not really sure what all the dream talk is about. Why they're so focused on it, why they think they have to get off the train as soon as they see a sign from their dreams.

And that's when I see it. It's far away, but it kind of stands out, this big, gangly pink house on the top of a hill, a long long drive snaking up to it. A yellow car sits in front of the house, and a garden floats from the back of the house on up to the top of the hill.

"The next stop, please, guys," I say, but either they can't hear me or they're not listening. I try to yell my request. "GUYS! NEXT STOP!"

Ben turns his head to me. I jump up on the seat and try to pull the stop request, but my hand is smoke. He looks out the window, sees what I see. He frowns, and I know somewhere in the back of his mind he recognises it too,



only it's farther away for him. Still, that recognition is enough — it's just like a scrap from a long forgotten dream, drifting to the surface at exactly the right trigger. He pulls the stop cord.

The train doors open right onto that long and twisty gravel drive. Ben's face is pulled into a cross between a frown and the drawn eyebrows of puzzlement as he tries to put a finger on exactly where we are. I could tell him, but what's the fun in that?

We climb the drive. It doesn't take long, but the weather's a bit wet, and I can tell Amelia wishes she had brought a long yellow raincoat and hat. Ben's trench works okay. Hal seems to be adjusting to his fleshly body pretty well, for he happily hops along beside us, splashing through puddles and ribbiting all the way up to the house.

The house is rambling, as though someone had cut up three different dollhouses then glued them together and painted the whole thing pink just to cover up the joined-up bits. There's a front door where you'd expect one to be. Then there's another down some stairs and to the right, and another up some more stairs and to the left. I wander around, hoping to meet some of the house's notably strange inhabitants, but the house is empty, all three parts of it.

Amelia knocks at the regular front door. No one answers, and she tries the knob. The door swings open, like the opening scenes to a horror film—

*—blood, there will be blood on the floor, drips from my arm where he's carved his initials into the soft white part—*

—but nothing jumps out at us, and there aren't any spider webs or crazy violin music or anything, so we go on in.

"Oh, wow," Ben says, and the frown and puzzled look are gone. He knows where we are. "We've come to the right place, I think. This was one of Lilly's favorite stories. Wasn't it, Lilly?"

I nod, because they still seem to be having trouble hearing me, and I get really tired when I try.

Ben crosses into the living room, and picks up the only item in the room, a snow-globe that sits on the mantel. Inside, it is as empty as the room, devoid of decoration, furniture, or people. He swishes the snow around, and it falls on empty space, then he replaces it to its spot.

I lead them back to the kitchen, also empty of furnishings, save another

object. Somehow I'd known it would be there, the old iron key hanging from a thread by the door. I point, and Ben grabs it.

"Lilly, no. Don't you remember the bad things that happened when she went through that doorway?"

I shrug as Amelia asks "What doorway? Who went through? Have you been here before? What is this, a funhouse?"

Ben shakes his head. "It's a story, a book. I think they made a movie, too. But I only remember the book, and Lilly loved it. It's about a little girl who has two mothers, and one tries to take her away from the other."

I stamp my foot. He's getting it wrong.

But he goes on, murdering the story anyway. "They live side-by-side in this house, but the only way to get across is through this little doorway. I guess this key opens it."

"You're sure that's the story?" Amelia asks, hands on her hips, her rainbow hair peering dubiously at Ben.

"Sure I'm sure. I read it to her."

"With me," I say. "You read it with me, and you clearly did not pay attention. Nobody has two mothers, dummy."

Ben turns to me, having heard nothing. He holds up the key. "Bad things happened on the other side of the house, Lilly. Why would you want to go there?"

Yes or no questions, you dummy. If you can't hear me, you can't go around asking word problem questions.

Amelia rescues me. "In case you haven't noticed, bright boy, bad things *are* happening to her. Maybe she's got to address bad stuff in her dreams so she can snap out of whatever's going on."

"I dunno," Ben says, and now it's his turn for his hair to look dubiously at Amelia. Greasy, uncombed black shag isn't quite as effective, though. "It doesn't make sense."

Amelia snatches the key from his hand. "Hello. You just took a train from Crazy Coyote's Magic Castle through Big Bad Wolf country to a little pink house. And you think you're going to make sense out of this? Do you get denser as the day goes on, or is it just me?"

"It's not just you," Hal says from her pocket.

I roll my eyes, and this Ben can see.

"Don't start with me," he warns in his big brother voice. But that only worked when I was really little, so I drift past him and out into the den.

The door's not as little as I'd imagined it being, maybe because now I have to imagine Ben and Amelia being able to fit through it. The key still fits when Amelia tries it, though, and the door swings open. This time there is a rusty squeal from the hidden hinges, and a sort of waiting darkness beyond. It's about as welcoming as climbing into a sewer tunnel underneath a graveyard, but I know what's on the other side.

*—the knife, the cutting. He's pressing it deeper, and it's dull so it tears at me. I think I can hear my skin ripping, and I try to cry out but his hand smothers me, wet and hot across my cheeks—*

"I'm telling you, Ami, there is a crazy ass lady on the other side who puts people's eyes out."

"She tries to put my eye out and we're gonna have a come-to-Jesus. *Sabé?*"

Jeez. You'd think they were brother and sister. I drop to my hands and knees and crawl down the tunnel. They could follow me or not. The story says I go down the tunnel, so I go.

On the other side, the house is much the same. Only this side has furniture, big, comfy, worn furniture. Not Good Will furniture, or garage sale furniture, or furniture with cigarette burns and smelly stains on it. Just happy, cozy, Saturday afternoon in the rain furniture, where you read a book and your mom brings you hot cocoa. I think these things happen someplace, to some people.

"Lilly!" The voice comes from the kitchen. "Lilly, are you out there? Don't you want a snack?"

We all look at each other. The voice is like the furniture, soft and cozy. Motherly. Tears well up in my eyes and begin to fall—

*—he sees them, and a happy smile plays across his face.*

*"Not so tough now, are you, Lilly? What is it, Lilly? You can tell me. I'm your big brother. I'm here for you."*

*I blink them away, but it's too late. The drops streak across my cheek, leaking down into my ear, into the pillow.*

*He wipes the wet away, rubs it between his—*

—fingers snapping in my face. Amelia leans over me, a strand of green hair falling through my shoulder.

"Lilly," she says softly, softer than I've ever heard her talk before. "Lilly, do you want to go in there?"

Yes. Oh, yes, so so much. Even if it's not real, even if she has black buttons for eyes and wants to keep my heart locked inside a marble forever and ever. I want to go in there, and have some milk and cookies, to have half an hour where she pretends she's the best mother I never had. I want to go in there, yes, please yes.

The mother's voice calls me again. "Lilly! Your friends are welcome to a snack, too. I'd like to meet them, say hello."

But Ben is shaking his head. "No. No, Lilly, I know you want to—" Now his voice is weird, shaky and broken. "I know you want to go in there. I do too."

"Can it hurt?" Amelia asks. "I don't know the story. Dream, whatever."

"I don't...I don't think this is the right dream."

How could it be the wrong dream? It's my dream. Mine. And if it's my dream, and I dream it, I can do what I like. I don't have to listen to him. He left me, left me with nothing but these dreams to hide in.

I go into the kitchen. Ben tries to stand in my way, but I dash through him like a scene from *Ghostbusters*.

It's the same kitchen as the other side of the house, but here it's got a table. A yellow gingham tablecloth covers it, and a glass vase full of daisies sits in the middle. The countertops are filled up — breadbox, toaster, coffee and tea jars, a spice rack with every spice on the planet, practically.

But there's no mother here, other or otherwise. It's empty.

"Hello? Mother, are you here?" There's no answer. I don't know if anyone can hear me at all, but if anyone should be able to hear me when no one else can, it's my mother. The mother in my dream should be able to hear me, if I say she should. "Mom, please, can you hear me? I brought my friends. Ben is here too. I know you want to see him, too."

Amelia and Ben step through the doorway. No one else.

I crumple to the floor and start to cry. She was here, she was. And she wanted me to come to her, and I didn't. I should have come right away when

she called. If she would only call me again, I'll come straight off. I won't wait this time. Please call to me again.

"She's fading," Ben says. He kneels over me—

*—his mouth on my face, tasting my tears, my blood.*

*"You want me to be your mother, Lilly? I can be your mother."*

*No. My mother is gone. I never had a mother. I had a brother. A real brother, who loved me.*

*I open my mouth, trying to speak, and taste the thick, cloying sweat on his palm. He pulls his hand away from my face, letting me speak.*

*I don't speak. I scream.*

*"Ben! Ben, please come, Ben!" I scream as loudly as I can, shattering the dark. Maybe Ben will come, will break through, will find me just from my voice. Maybe someone else, my foster mother, anyone.*

*The dark becomes his face. No matter who comes, it will be too late, says the dark.*

"I'm here, Lilly." Ben's hands stroke my forehead, my hair. They are cool, though they shake.

"She's getting stronger," Amelia says. "Look, she's not passing through my hand anymore." Amelia takes my hand, and I can feel her rings and her bracelets and the soft warmth of her fingers.

"Did it work?" Ben asks.

"Did what work?" Amelia says. "We haven't done anything."

"She might have, though," Hal comments. "We don't know what she's doing in...on the other...where her body is."

I cough. "I'm right here, you know."

Ben laughs, but it's wet. I feel drops falling on my face from his. "You are. You're here. We're all here."

But I keep coughing. I'm here, but something is pulling at me, and not in a good way. It feels like when you swallow one end of a spaghetti noodle, then try to pull it back up. Only it feels like that all over.

"I don't think I get to stay," I tell Ben.

"Of course you do," Hal says. "Someone has to take me home."

I smile, and roll a finger down his slimy back.

Ben lifts me, pulls me to his chest. "What's happening back there, Lilly?"

I shake my head. I don't know. I snuggle my face to his neck. He smells a bit of dirt and smoke.

"Once upon a time," I say, and I feel him sob. "Once upon a time there was a girl and a boy, a sister and a brother. They loved each other very much, and had wonderful adventures."

"What's going on?" Amelia whispers.

I continue. "The powerful rulers of the land, though, they said one small girl and one less small boy were not enough to be a family, and they took the girl away. The girl was very sad, but she knew her brother was even sadder. She knew he would look for her, but she had no way to look for him."

"She's fading again, Ben." Amelia grips my hand, but her fingers start to slide through. "Ben?"

Ben squeezes me so tightly.

I can only whisper now. "So the girl made stories instead. She made stories from their adventures, and stories with new worlds in them so they could find each other again. She wished them...and she...she dreamed them..."

"Lilly?" Ben whispers. "Lilly, please. Finish the story. I need to hear the end. We always have an end to our stories. Please, Lilly."

I reach up to his face, but I can only see a vague outline of my hand. I'm slipping right through his arms, and underneath my fingers I can only feel the warmth of his cheek, not the skin at all. It isn't fair.

"It isn't fair," he says, his tears dropping through me.

"You have to finish it, Ben. Finish it for me."

Ben slumps, his arms dropping to the ground at his sides. Amelia and Hal stare at him. Everyone is crying so much that no one minds if all the rest of them see.

"She dreamed them," Amelia says shakily. "She dreamed her worlds, for us — for Ben — to find her. And she had grand adventures—"

"Stop it," Ben says.

"She rescued frog princes and escaped from—*ribbit*—evil queens," Hal continues. "She flew a glider across the width of the 'while."

Ben gets up, throws the kitchen table, yellow gingham flapping. "Stop it! It can't end. You can't tell the ending! There isn't an ending!"

Amelia stands, too. "Keep going, Hal."

"Stop, Hal."

But Hal keeps going, even as Amelia says to Ben, "She wants us to finish it for her. She wants us to keep telling the stories, the way she's been telling, dreaming, ours."

Ben keeps shaking his head. He shakes it back and forth, and his hands shake, and his legs shake, and he makes fists, but he doesn't try to stop Hal again.

When Hal falters, telling of his kidnapping-by-crow, Amelia begins the story. And when she reaches the castle, and the Trickster queen, Ben interrupts.

"I found her. I finally found her. The queen didn't break her, and the world didn't save her. But I found her, and I brought her here. I spent one last day with the sister who formed my world."

Amelia doesn't touch him. She stands next to him, close, as the story finishes.

"What do I do now?" he asks her.

"I think..." She stretches her hand down for Hal to jump into it. "I think we keep telling stories. Look at what we've done, at the world we're in. We keep telling stories, and maybe one day we tell a story where Lilly comes back again."

She takes his hand, and leads him out of the house. Outside, the world has changed. They walked into the house on the other side, on the normal side, but they walk out into the side that, in the story, is all twisted up. In the story, the world on this side is small, so small that you can walk all the way to the horizon and wind up right back where you started in just a few minutes. But they're not really in the story, and no one knows where the road will take them now.

THE END...

FOR NOW

***Færwile* & the Multimodal Creative Practice:  
Composing Fiction from Analogue to Digital**

Critical Exegesis  
by  
R. Lyle Skains



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

"Second to the right, and straight on till morning."

That, Peter had told Wendy, was the way to Neverland; but even birds, carrying maps and consulting them at windy corners, could not have sighted it with these instructions.

—J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, 1911

Peter Pan, to my nine-year-old self, was not yet a trickster or a psychological syndrome. He was not wicked. He was not an archetype. To me, reading in bed at night, not quite understanding how far away from turn-of-the-century London I was, he was an idol. Partly because he never grew up, of course. But mostly because he had such an amazing world in which to play, to imagine, to dream up awfully big adventures. My captivation with *Peter and Wendy*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1900), and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865) lay in storyworlds that created many potential stories, narrative possibilities that could be expressed in reading and in play.

The practice-led research presented in this thesis is a scholarly exploration into the very sense of narrative possibility and play that rich, engaging storyworlds provide. The underlying creative drive for the work was to craft storyworlds that extended off the page, utilising the particular affordances of digital media, to present readers with a myriad of potential narratives (Montfort 2003) to explore, expand, and even interact with and construct themselves. The overarching research purpose of this project was to explore the effects of shifting from a writing practice grounded in prose to one that is multimodal, and that results in multimedia texts. As a practicing fiction writer (short and long form fiction), I was intrigued by the affordances of digital media, in terms of creative play and narrative effects. How would the anti-linear (Ensslin 2012) structure of digital texts like websites and computer games affect my established practice of writing stories with clear Aristotelean dramatic structure? How would adding the possibility of image and music to my stories affect my composition practice, my narrative voice?

In order to answer these questions, I engaged in a practice-led research<sup>1</sup> project: to create a fictional narrative in both analogue (print) and digital forms, observing and analysing the effects of this multimodal composition on my practice and the resulting narratives. This project thus consists of both the creative artefacts and the critical exegesis that presents my analysis and answers to the research questions. The creative artefacts encompass the analogue novella *Færwhile* and its digital counterpart. *Færwhile* is a tale inspired rather fundamentally by those stories of lost children that so captivated me as a child; it is crafted around three characters who are all lost, metaphorically as well as literally. Lilly and Ben are orphaned siblings, separated by the foster system, desperate to reunite; Amelia is an orphaned only child, removed far from the land, culture, and technology that shaped her sense of self before her parents' deaths. Enter the Trickster<sup>2</sup> figure, who lures each into *Færwhile*, a journey through a space of time, a storyworld crafted by dreams and imagination. Throughout their travels to find one another — whether by design or by luck — the Trickster both tells their tale and meddles within it, blurring the lines between story actors and storytellers. This blurring is reflected in the navigation, image, and audio in the digital fiction, and shown through metalepsis and shifts in narrative perspective in the analogue novella (see Chapters 3 and 4 for the critical analysis of these narrative devices). The digital fiction actualises the fabula through a variety of narrative media, including Flash fiction, interactive fiction, blog fiction, and hyperfiction. These platforms were chosen in order to gain a broader understanding of the available media and their literary affordances; the selection of each was based primarily on its suitability for best crafting and communicating the characters, themes, and voice of each individual story/chapter (see Chapters 3 and 6 for an examination of how the materiality of the different media affected the narrative devices and decisions).

The critical exegesis introduced in this chapter presents the conclusions drawn regarding the research questions, within the scope of the project, examining both my experiences in crafting *Færwhile*, and analysis of the final artefacts. The next section encompasses a brief clarification of the concepts "medium" and "mode" relevant to this project. I then discuss the critical context of digital fiction and practice-led research

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1 Practice-led research, both the term and the methodology, are discussed in depth in Chapter 2: Methodology.

2 The Trickster myth is a pervasive one throughout many world cultures, appearing as a raven or coyote in many Native American mythologies, as Taliesin in the Welsh mythology, Anansi in West African mythology, Hermes in Greek mythology, Loki in Norse mythology, etc. See Hyde 1998; Bierlein 1994.

into the area of digital fiction, followed by an overview of the structure of this critical exegesis.

### **Clarifying "Medium" and "Mode"**

The concepts of "medium" and "mode" warrant clarification, as their uses even within the study of electronic literature are variable. In *Avatars of Story* (2006), Marie-Laure Ryan separates narrative media into three types: *conduits*, *communicative modes*, and *cultural practices*. The latter is of a broader scope than this thesis addresses; media as conduit and/or mode, however, are concepts directly applicable to this study. In describing media as a *conduit*, Ryan builds upon the concept of media as technology (television, newspaper, book, film, etc.) through which messages are encoded, transmitted, and recoded on the receiving end, similar to what N. Katherine Hayles refers to as "inscription technologies" (2002). Prior to the advent of digital technologies, this definition entailed a clear material connotation: for instance, the material of the film medium (celluloid), in terms of inscription, transmission, and manifestation, was physically distinct from the newspaper medium (paper). Ryan presents *communicative modes*<sup>3</sup> as a second type of narrative media, specifically the phenomena of verbal, visual, and aural semiotic systems (2006, 18). Roughly, these systems map to language, image, and music, though overlaps are inevitable, as written language also engages with a visual mode, and dance with both visual and aural: "The affordances of language, pictures, and music complement each other, and when they are used together in multichannel media, each of them builds a different facet of the total imaginative experience" (Ryan 2006, 20).

While Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) do not clearly define these distinctions for the term "medium" in their exploration of the grammar of visual design, they nonetheless vacillate between medium-as-conduit, medium-as-inscription-technology, and medium-as-communication-mode in their usage, largely relying upon the context of their discussion and frequent parenthetical qualifiers to distinguish the connotations. Kress's use of "mode" is similarly fluid, as he defines it as "the name for a culturally and socially fashioned resource for representation and communication" (2003, 45), which, depending upon context, could refer to Ryan's communicative

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3 Ryan distinguishes between narrative modes and communicative modes, the former a set of (mostly) binary narrative cases that offer "a distinct way to bring to mind the cognitive construct that defines narrativity" (2006, 12).

modes, or to media-as-conduit. Ruth Page (2010) echoes this flexibility of meaning, noting that medium refers both to the physical materials of communication and the channel of communication.

As this thesis largely focuses on the composition process and the resulting artefact, I use "medium" to refer to inscription technologies, or "devices [that] initiate material changes that can be read as marks" (Hayles 2002, 24), such as books (inscribed ink on paper), computers (inscribed input into code, language, image), film (inscribed light on celluloid), etc. This definition incorporates Ryan, Kress & van Leeuwen, and Page's denotations of medium-as-conduit, while acknowledging the conditions imposed by that same conduit's size and shape, which Ryan argues is essential for the study of narrative across media (2006, 18). "Mode", heretofore, refers to Ryan's *communicative modes*, in order to offer a distinction between the semiotic phenomenon being transcribed, and the material on which it is transcribed. These distinctions allow me to discuss the materiality of the digital medium, how its shape and structure affect transcription, as well as the affordances of composing with multiple modes upon that medium.

## **Background & Context**

Current discourse about technology typically focuses on the digital: the hardware of computers, tablets, and phones; the software of media files, games, and online communication. Storytelling, however, has undergone several evolutionary epochs, from the folktales of oral culture and the drama of the ancient Greeks to the technology of the printing press. Film's debut at the turn of the 20th century and the emergence of television 50 years later expanded the print culture to a visual culture. In the latter half of the 20th century the computer and its accompanying video games and combined visual and text capabilities introduced yet further aspects and possibilities for storytelling. Walter Benjamin notes that "[t]he history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard" (1968, 237). While the aspiring effects of stories told through digital media are still emerging, the rapidly changing standards of modern technology are providing ample opportunity to develop and experiment with the art forms they afford, including that examined in this thesis: digital fiction.

"Digital fiction" is encompassed as a literary genre within the overarching

category of electronic literature (or "e-lit") (Electronic Literature Organization, n.d.); as used in this thesis, it is defined by Alice Bell, et al. as:

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 (2010, n.p.).

The term "digital" is unfortunately vague as a modifier for "media" (though less vague and technological epoch-dependent than "new"), as most media technologies have become, at least partially, digital: movies, television, music, and even print text are now frequently captured and displayed via digital technologies. The important distinction lies in the connotation carried in the combination of the terms "digital" and "fiction". Taken alone, "digital" refers to a medium of communication, a "meta-medium that encodes all other media" (Ryan 2009, n.p.; cf. Kress 2003) including visual, aural, and verbal modes. "Fiction" refers to that which is not fact, that which is composed of invention and imagination; as a literary genre it conveys characters and events whose similarity to the real world is a result of mimicry, not of fact. The "digital" modifier, even without the clear definitions offered by Bell, et al. and the ELO, connotes a special condition: the digital fiction text requires the specific affordances and capabilities of digital media, both in composition and consumption. Thus, while at first glance it seems a dissatisfying and dull moniker for the wide variety of narrative forms afforded by digital media<sup>4</sup>, the term "digital fiction" is actually a fairly elegant designation for these works; as such, it is the term used throughout this thesis to denote the genre of born-digital fictional narratives.

Specific forms of digital fiction have historically emerged as experiments with programming or play. Scientists and humanists alike argue that narrative is one of the fundamental activities of human social interaction (Dautenhahn 1999) and cognition (Herman 2010). It then follows that as humans develop communicative technologies, so too will we adapt those technologies (if their primary purpose is not storytelling) to narrative purposes; throughout the history of human culture, we have certainly done so, as Walter Benjamin explores in his seminal examination of art and mechanical

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4 The Electronic Literature Organization's stated definition of electronic literature explicitly identifies the e-lit subgenres: hypertext fiction and poetry, kinetic poetry, computer art installations, chatterbots, interactive fiction, email/chat/SMS novels, code poetry, collaborative texts, and literary performances. It is worth noting that this is a preliminary list of e-lit subgenres; a significant strategy of the ELO's developing Electronic Literature Directory (<http://directory.eliterature.org>) is a system of reader/member-contributed tags in a "folksonomical" (Tabbi 2007, n.p.) approach to developing and applying categories. See Tabbi 2007 and 2010 for further discussion.

reproduction (1968). Digital fiction emerged as part of this pattern, as writers began to experiment with form and narrative in the new media. For example, Dennis Jerz outlines Will Crowther's creation of *Colossal Cave Adventure*, arguably the first interactive fiction (also known as text adventure games) (2007). Crowther created the text as an activity he could share with his children, coding an environment based in real-world caves. Jerz notes that the interactive fiction "was written for fun and shared for free; it was the cultural product of an educated, puzzle-loving, and fundamentally altruistic geek culture" (2007, para. 17). This experimental creative culture is present throughout the progression of digital fiction, from hypertexts in the tradition of Michael Joyce's *afternoon* (1987), to collaborative digital films such as *Morgan M. Morgansen's Date with Destiny* (hitRECORD.org 2010). The *Færwhile* project, primarily purposed for critical examination of process and narrative, is thus a creative experiment at its core. It is an attempt to explore the narrative possibilities presented by these new technologies, by hyperlinks and user-input, and to question the traditional structure of prose while still feeding these new discoveries back into it.

In acknowledging technology's effects upon literature, Hayles argues for a media-specific analysis of texts (both digital and analogue), noting that "*...the physical form of the literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components) mean*" (Hayles 2002, 25; emphasis original). Ryan's work examining narrative across media and media effects upon narrative incorporates media-specific analysis as a method of transmedia narratology, refining and re-defining the study of narrative. Digital narratologists<sup>5</sup> apply media-specific post-textual analysis to digital fictions, offering insight into the narrative effects of these digital media. As contemporary storytellers engage with and embrace the multimodal and multimedia affordances of digital technology, a similar need arises for the creator to understand how these inscription technologies affect the composition process. Stuart Moulthrop notes that these technologies "challenge humanists and information scientists to reconsider fundamental assumptions about the social space of writing" as they may lead to "a new textual order with a new politics of knowledge and expression" (1991, para. 53). Just as media-specific analysis offers hope of "forging a robust and nuanced account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies"

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5 For a sampling of close readings of multimodal texts and/or e-lit incorporating aspects of media-specific analysis, see Abba 2009; Bell & Ensslin 2011; Bouchardon & Heckman 2012; Ensslin 2012; Ensslin & Bell 2012; Herman 2010; Hutcheon & Hutcheon 2010; Page 2010; Page & Herman 2010; Pence 2002.

(Hayles 2002, 19), so too can a media-specific examination of the practice of creating digital literature, such as that contained in this thesis, offer insight into these changes.

Much of the insight currently offered from the digital writer's perspective has grown from experimentation with the media. Many practitioners are scholars who are "part of a tradition of avant-garde artists and writers throughout the 20th century who were themselves activist artist-researchers" (Amerika 2004a, 73). This research offers tantalising insights into the process of digital writing, and the larger implications of literary theory, particularly with regard to the relationship between writer and machine. A small sample set includes Stuart Moulthrop, Mark Amerika, Jenny Weight, and Alan Sondheim, who can be seen to approach the "phenomenology of the analog and the digital in relation to each other" (Sondheim 2006, 377). Moulthrop's creative experimentation in hypertext led to his foundation work in the study and theory of electronic literature, theorising that these technologies lead to a "breakdown" in the natural process of writing, thus introducing innovation and complications that further the discourse of composition and literature (1995). This discourse, for Moulthrop, extends beyond the literary, into digital humanism (1999a, 1999b). Amerika explores the concept of the artist as a "remixer" (2011), wherein "...the use of junkyard detritus from the post-industrial ruins of everyday life has become almost commonplace in the garage-sale poetics of the contemporary art world..." (1997, n.p.), and the mental spaces in which the net-artist engages while creating these remixed and recycled works (2004b). Jenny Weight examines the human-technology relation, and how the computer as apparatus becomes a collaborator for both the programmer/writer and the reader of the digital text (2006). The *Færwhile* project focuses on the point of Moulthrop's "breakdown", in the exchange between analogue and digital composition, as remixed detritus is sculpted into literary innovation through the networked synapses of silicon conductors and writerly cognition.

It is worth noting that much of this practice-oriented discourse results from reflection or post-textual analysis; for instance, Sondheim's critical writings emerge as a result of his creative practice, as part of his creative practice, or about his creative practice; rarely does his creative practice seem to be driven by directed critical questions (2012). Linda Flower & John R. Hayes note that writers' own accounts of their composition process are "often idiosyncratic and inaccurate — hard to verify or compare — and they tend to describe feelings about writing rather than the act itself" (1984, 122). Harold Garfinkel, in his seminal work establishing the field of

ethnomethodology, notes that subjects' reflective accounts of their activities are unfortunately "loose"; i.e., the subject may not be able to logically construct remembered sequences, to analyse the reasoning behind a sequence or utterance, or to identify underlying conditions of a sequence or exchange (1967, 2). Hindsight, in other words, is not always 20/20.

Fewer still publications key in on the writer shifting from analogue to digital composition, particularly from the perspective of the practitioner. Ethnomethodological studies of students engaging in analogue and digital composition are emerging (cf. Brandt 1992; Crafton 1996; Fortune 2005; Graham & Whalen 2008; Ranker 2008; Vasudevan, et al. 2010), as well as cognitive approaches to composition (cf. Brandt 1992; Flower & Hayes 1981, 1984; Harris 1989; Hayes & Flower 1986; Herman 2010; Lubart 2009; Menary 2007; Quinlan, et al. 2012; Runco 2009; Ward & Lawson 2009). Most of these studies, however, are based on observations of students, rather than experts (i.e., experienced creative writers or practitioners), and thus may not necessarily map to professional creative practice, particularly with prose writers who have an established practice and process of composition. Hayles notes that many digital writers come from an analogue background, rather than a programming background, and as such encounter steep upward learning curves in terms of visual, graphic, and software design (2007a, n.p.); a professional writer shifting from an established practice of prose writing to a new paradigm of digital composition is likely to differ significantly from the student who is not an expert in either domain.

By conducting a study that engages in both practice-led research into process and post-textual media-specific analysis of the artefacts, this research attempts to continue the experimental exploration of digital fiction from a fresh angle. As discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2: Methodology, this practice-led research was initially oriented through specific research goals; the creative element of this thesis was created primarily to address the central academic question: how does multimodal composition affect process and narrative? This provided a directed goal for the creative practice, enabling me to observe the effects *in situ* (or as close as possible) of my learning process in action, a self-directed ethnomethodological study (cf. Garfinkel 1967; Brandt 1992; Flower & Hayes 1981). Following this auto-ethnomethodological observation of my own practice with media-specific analysis of the resulting artefacts (including drafts and notes) offers an additional layer of robustness to the observations, as I am not merely relying upon memory or "feelings about the writing", but analysing



the writing itself to corroborate the *in situ* and reflective observations. As such, this research offers new insights into the practice of digital composition, and the effects of digital media upon literary narratives.

### **Structure of Critical Thesis**

As the following chapters will demonstrate, crafting narratives in digital media had significant and profound effects on both my writing process and the narratives themselves. Specifically, composing multimodal texts refocuses the writer's cognitive composition process on media-specific semiotic translations, and results in texts that depart from traditional narrative forms into anti-linear structures engaging in unnatural narration.

In order to arrive at significant conclusions, of course, any research endeavour must be grounded in a robust methodology. Chapter 2 describes the method used in this project, after first examining the methodologies incorporated: practice-led research, ethnomethodology, cognitive approaches, and post-textual analysis. The overarching methodology for this research is practice-led, as it is driven by the creative activity. In order to examine that activity, however, further models were required: auto-ethnomethodology offered a method to observe my practice *in situ* and to interpret those observations; a cognitive approach to composition enabled me to analyse and discuss the internalised activities of digital writing; and post-textual analysis permitted me not only to gain a deeper understanding of the artefacts themselves, but also a triangulation method supporting my self-observations and reflections.

Chapter 3 examines how the specific materiality of digital media affords multimodal layering of meaning, enabling the imagined stories to be translated multimodally from the writer's preinventive structures (Finke 1996; Ward, Smith & Finke 1999) to the text on screen. The use of multiple modes within a single narrative permit the author to use each mode's communicative strengths, resulting in a layered metaphor woven through multiple modes of communication. This interaction of materials is reflective of cognitive processes (the writer's and the reader's) in navigating and making meaning from the narrative.

The affordances and conventions of digital platforms also significantly evolved the narrative perspective of my creative texts in both analogue and digital form. Chapter 4 examines the progression of my use of narrators to convey their stories,

documenting the shift from mimetic first- and third-person narration in nearly all of my work preceding this research to unnatural narration (Richardson 2006) and anti-linear structures in both the analogue and digital artefacts. These experimental perspectives emerged in the artefacts as second-person perspective (an effect driven by its near-standard use in interactive fiction and other reader-directed media), metalepsis, and multiple narrators. As Chapter 4 argues, these "unnatural" effects in print fiction seem almost naturalised in this particular project, as the layering of digital media mirrors the layering of narrators, and helps to deepen the central metaphor: that every person narrates their own story, and everyone's stories interlink with one another.

Chapter 5 explores a rather unexpected, yet significant discovery about collaborative efforts in digital media: while I had not engaged in explicit collaboration in this project, as I had not sought the assistance of other programmers, artists, or writers in creating the narratives themselves, the artefacts had nonetheless been significantly shaped by other creators. Chapter 5 discusses the implicit collaboration that arises from appropriating digital resources such as visuals, audio, and source code shared online under Creative Commons licensing. This phenomenon of appropriation has been described by other writers (Amerika 1997; Goldsmith 2011), and has significant implications not only for the resulting artefact, but for the authorship of the artefact as well.

Finally, as I progressed deeper and deeper into this project, I discovered that the mere expansion of knowledge and awareness of digital technologies and ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997) results in changes to the composition process, shifting it from a monomodal translation of imagined story to written text, to a multimodal practice engaged in multiple media even in planning stages. Chapter 6 discusses these effects by first describing my established writing process, then analysing my altered process and the resulting narratives in order to demonstrate how my growing explicit knowledge and understanding of digital fiction (including relevant theory) gradually became internalised to tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). This internalisation fundamentally altered my approach to character, structure, and composition at the cognitive level.

Overall, these findings have significant impact upon the fields of creative writing and transmedia narratology. Examination of how digital media affect narrative composition can help writers to better understand their chosen inscription technologies, and thus to engage more thoroughly with the narrative possibilities (and limitations)

afforded by them. An incomplete understanding of medium and its effects on composition and narrative results in digital fictions that do not take full advantage of that medium's affordances, just as a lack of linguistic comprehension negatively affects a writer's prose. These findings can also benefit post-textual analyses of digital literature, particularly those examining the tendency of electronic literature toward unnatural narration (second-person narration, metalepsis, lack of closure, anti- or multilinearity, etc.), as this thesis provides insight into why these techniques are so well-suited for digital media, and vice versa. Finally, these findings can conceivably impact upon the role of digital fiction as a genre of literature — in terms of artist- and scholar-engagement as noted, but also in terms of reader response and market awareness. Electronic literature is currently a primarily experimental form in Western literature, yet to gain a foothold in a mainstream authorship or readership. While the broader questions of why this is the case are outside the scope of this particular project, gaining a better understanding into the process of creating digital fiction may help to provide a foundation for later studies into these areas.

## Chapter 2

### Methodology

The methodology used in this practice-led research is a targeted combination of auto-ethnomethodology, reflective analysis applied to cognitive composition and creativity models, and post-textual media-specific analysis of the creative artefacts. This chapter examines each of these models of research (practice-led, ethnomethodology, cognitive approach, and post-textual analysis), followed by the combined methodology model that is not only appropriate to this particular project, but one that can be applied to practice-led research in future projects.

#### Practice-led Research

In related literature, "the terms 'arts-based research', 'practice-based research', 'practice-led research', 'practice-centered research', 'studio-based research' are more or less used synonymously" (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes 2007, 7). This thesis uses the term "practice-led research" throughout; this term is the one used most consistently in the literature (cf. Perry 2008, Stewart 2006, Smith & Dean 2009, Sullivan 2009), perhaps because it most closely connotes the actual process of this type of research. Other terms, such as "practice-centered", "arts/practice-based", and "studio-based", incorporate the practice, but do not connote research that is directed by the creative endeavour. "Practice-led" connotes a focused project, a creative experiment designed to answer questions about the process and results of the practice itself: "it involves the identification of research questions and problems, but the research methods, contexts and outputs then involve a significant focus on creative practice" (Sullivan 2009, 48). The outcomes of such research are intended to develop the individual practice and the practice of the field, to build theory related to the practice in order to gain new knowledge or insight (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes 2007, 10; Sullivan 2009, 48).

Graeme Sullivan's 2009 model identifies a framework of four key areas in which a practice-led research methodology is applicable and appropriate: *theoretical*, exploring research issues and problems; *conceptual*, in which "artists give form to thoughts in creating artefacts that become part of the research process" (50); *dialectical*,

exploring the human process of experiential meaning-making; and *contextual*, in which the practice is an effort to bring about social change (morality plays, for example). The research presented here aligns foremost with Sullivan's *conceptual* framework of practice-led research, in that the creative undertaking is an attempt to understand the artefacts themselves, rather than to explore the human condition or social context. The purpose of this study was to gain greater insight into the creative process of multimodal composition, as well as into the newly emerging form of digital fiction, its affordances and narratological implications. "The demands of such work [digital arts] often reveal the limitations of existing technologies and open the door to developing new approaches and techniques" (Edmonds, et al. 2005, 2); the purpose of this project is to not only open the doors, but to engage with what is beyond them.

### **Ethnomethodology**

Ernest A. Edmonds, et al. note, "[t]he investigation of creativity as it takes place in naturalistic settings has been difficult to achieve and most studies of creativity draw on retrospective accounts of the creative process" (2005, 4). Thus, this project employed a self-directed form of ethnomethodology during the composition of the texts, in the form of a research log (noting insights, process, difficulties), and draft materials and revision notes (which could later be analysed as *in situ* utterances).

Harold Garfinkel defines ethnomethodology as "the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organised artful practices of everyday life" (1967, 11); ethnomethodologists observe their subjects' speech and activities within a given context in order to make these actions "visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical purposes (1967, vii). Garfinkel is careful not to identify ethnomethodology as method, for, like practice-led research, its method must be designed on the basis of each individual study. Social scientists practice ethnomethodology when observing people's everyday activities, in order to use those activities as recordable and reportable data that can then be interpreted for the activities' temporal features and sequencing, establishment of the subject's knowledge of setting or activity, establishment and evaluation of models of activity, and evaluation of how people use their knowledge and experience to make decisions or take action. Interestingly, Garfinkel presents Karl Mannheim's "documentary method of interpretation" (78), which bears significant parallels to the

field of semiotics: this method treats the actual appearance of an activity (arguably the signifier) as evidence "documenting" that activity's underlying pattern (that which is signified). For instance, a writer marking a draft-in-progress with the note "Hmm, now where does this go from here?" is an observable, recordable signifier documenting the underlying cognitive pattern of composition (signified), which can be examined and interpreted by the observer.

Deborah Brandt argues for just such a practice of ethnomethodology for writers (1992), building upon Linda Flower & John R. Hayes's 1981 Cognitive Process Model of composition (examined in the next section), wherein the cognitive activity of planning and executing composition activity is mapped as "a way of sustaining the social contexts that account for or display emerging understanding" (1992, 329). Brandt notes that "[s]ense-making in writing entails more than producing a coherent and appropriate text; fundamentally, writers must also make continual sense to themselves of what they are doing" (1992, 324). The process of this continual sense-making is often expressed in notes, journal entries, comments on revised drafts: observable paratexts to the composition.

It is also worth noting that Garfinkel argues for observing activities carried out by individuals whose competence is high enough that the activities are taken for granted, then making the activities visible by applying a "special motive" to make them of "theoretic interest" (1967, 37). This notion is highly suited to an auto-ethnomethodological approach to practice-led research, as the research often "start[s] with familiar scenes and ask[s] what can be done to make trouble" (Garfinkel 1967, 37). In the case of this thesis, I began with a familiar activity that was arguably mastered (prose writing, whose mastery is evidenced by professional publications and advanced writing degrees), and introduced digital media as a "special motive". The documentary method of interpretation — as applied to my *in situ* notes and drafts — in combination with media-specific analysis of the resulting artefacts, offers aspects of theoretical interest to the practice of digital writing and the domain of transmedia narratology.

Both Garfinkel (1967) and Flower & Hayes (1984) note that self-reflection is a problematic method in that individuals either do not have enough distance from their own activities to recognise patterns and sequences of significance, or they are so distanced from the actual activity that their memories cannot be considered accurate. Brandt, however, makes an argument in favour of auto-ethnomethodology, to an extent:

[B]oth ethnomethodologists and cognitive theorists in composition argue

for approaching social actions as they are subjectively meaningful to the actors themselves, studying, that is, the acting, thinking, articulating perspectives of people in the process of doing something (1992, 323).

The perspective of the writer, and how that writer ascribes meaning to her own activities, is thus a rather important perspective in studying the process of composition.

While I acknowledge the limitations of self-observation and reflection, I have also attempted to mitigate these limitations by A) approaching the creative activity from a clearly defined research question; B) observing my activities *in situ*, but interpreting these observation records (creative notes, drafts, research logs) after a time period that allows for a distanced perspective; and C) supplementing these observations of process with media-specific analysis of the creative artefacts themselves. A clearly-defined research question not only helped to define the scope of the creative practice, it provided a framework for examining the creative activity. Thanks to this focused frame, I could more easily distinguish and recognise the effects of the "trouble" of multimodal composition on my familiar activity of writing. This benefited not only real-time observations, but also reflection on my activities and later interpretation of my observation notes, creative drafts, and research logs. Similarly, by distancing myself both in time and perspective (the latter by applying post-textual analysis) from the creative practice, I was able to identify patterns in the creative process and narrative artefacts that may not have been apparent while the activity was underway. Combination of methodological approaches, therefore, has provided a more robust approach to examination of creative practice than reflection or post-textual analysis provide on their own.

### **Cognitive Approach**

Flower & Hayes's 1981 Cognitive Process Model of composition (see Figure 2.1) serves as a base for evaluating composition activities, as Deborah Brandt notes (1992). Flower & Hayes identify three key cognitive elements of the writing process: the writer's *knowledge* of topic, audience and context (also termed the "long-term memory"); the *task environment* (including everything external to the writer, the rhetorical problem, and the developing text), and the *writing process* itself (including planning activities, the actual writing of the text, and ongoing revision of the text). This model is a hierarchical model of composition, as opposed to a stage-based model: it describes the more fluid mental processes of composition, rather than a linear

progression of activities from one stage to the next. For example, a writer is likely to engage in goal setting for their text at any point in the composition, reshaping the goals for the text as review of the produced text enhances the writer's understanding of the rhetorical situation.

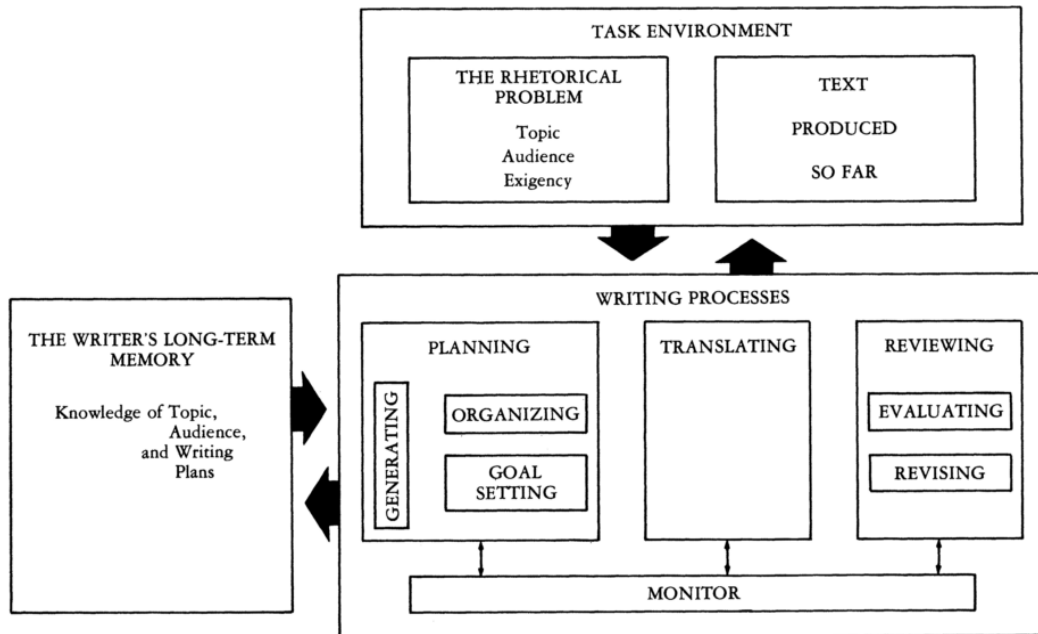


Figure 2.1. Flower & Hayes's Cognitive Process Model (1981, 370). Copyright 1981 by the National Council of Teachers of English (ncte.org). Used with permission.

The model is not a perfect one, as it is largely self-contained to the particular text currently underway, and does not explicitly account for external influences such as interruptions, long-term breaks in the creation process, or simultaneous work on other texts. It is also notable that this cognitive process model does not in the first instance incorporate multimodal forms of creation, which Andy Campbell calls a "liquid canvas" (2011, n.p.); incorporating Flower & Hayes' 1984 Multiple Representation Thesis, however, offers a more fluid aspect. This theory offers relevant insight into the development of Gunther Kress's "synaesthetic process" (1998, in Fortune 2005, 53) necessary for multimodal composition: essentially, that it is already inherent in the process of composition. "Writers at work represent their current meaning to themselves in a variety of symbolic ways", including nonverbal, procedural, and imagistic representations of ideas and knowledge (Flower & Hayes 1984, 129). The process of translating this abstract knowledge into written text is a difficult one, and the authors note that multimodal texts offer a significant advantage in that "some goals are better



accomplished with different representations... Which representation is in force at a given moment is probably driven [sic] by a combination of one's goals at that moment and the forms of the particular representation already stored in memory" (151). The argument can be made here that composing multimodally engages more naturally and fluidly with the planning process of composition. Alan Sondheim (2006) and Jenny Weight (2006) respectively echo this thesis in their practice-based explorations of their own digital composition process, and Jason Ranker likewise describes this effect in his 2008 ethnographic study of students composing in digital media.

Embedding this Cognitive Process Model within the framework of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's 1996 Systems Model of Creativity assists in consideration of external influences. The Systems Model defines creativity as occurring when "a person, using the symbols of a given domain...has a new idea or sees a new pattern, and when this novelty is selected by the appropriate field for inclusion into the relevant domain" (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, 28); this creative novelty either changes the domain, or transforms it to a new one. *Domain* encompasses a set of symbolic rules and procedures that identify an area of knowledge; *field* is the individuals who act as gatekeepers for that domain; *person* is used to identify the individual engaging in the creative activity, which Csikszentmihalyi notes requires an internalisation of the system — familiarity with the domain and field in which the creative act is engaged. According to this model, an act, idea, or product is not creative unless it is acknowledged by the relevant domain and field (which can be difficult, depending upon the domain and field's ability to recognise and incorporate the novelty's validity and implications). Accepting that the person engaged in the act of composition employs Flower & Hayes's "long-term memory", and that this must, according to Csikszentmihalyi, incorporate knowledge of domain and field, offers a way to account for these external influences in the cognitive processes of composition.

Another gap in Flower & Hayes's model rests in the "generating" box. Theirs is an encapsulated model of composition, offering a useful overview (at least from this writer's perspective) of the major categories, but giving little attention to the age-old fan question: Where do ideas come from? The idea, "the concept that serves as the starting point for idea generation and elaboration, is potentially idiosyncratic for each writer and can be more or less elaborate, which will influence the richness of associations resulting from a memory search" (Lubart 2009, 151).

Incorporating The Geneplore Model (Figure 2.2) (Finke, Ward, & Smith 1992

in Finke 1996) within the overarching framework of the "generating" phase of the Cognitive Process Model offers additional hierarchical levels of exploring the creative writing process. In this model, the authors propose a cycle of idea generation and exploration, which, like Flower & Hayes's model, can be revisited as and when needed. The Geneptore Model's generative processes mirror Flower & Hayes's Multiple Representation Thesis (1984): "in addition to visualised patterns and object forms, [generative processes] may include mental blends, category exemplars, mental models, and verbal or conceptual combinations" (Finke 1996, 385). The generative process is a brainstorm of ideas pulling from existing examples, recombination of elements from those exemplars, and novel approaches to the rhetorical problem. The resulting preinventive structures can then be explored and interpreted, then reshaped as needed (per rhetorical situation, which includes product constraints) through further generative processes.

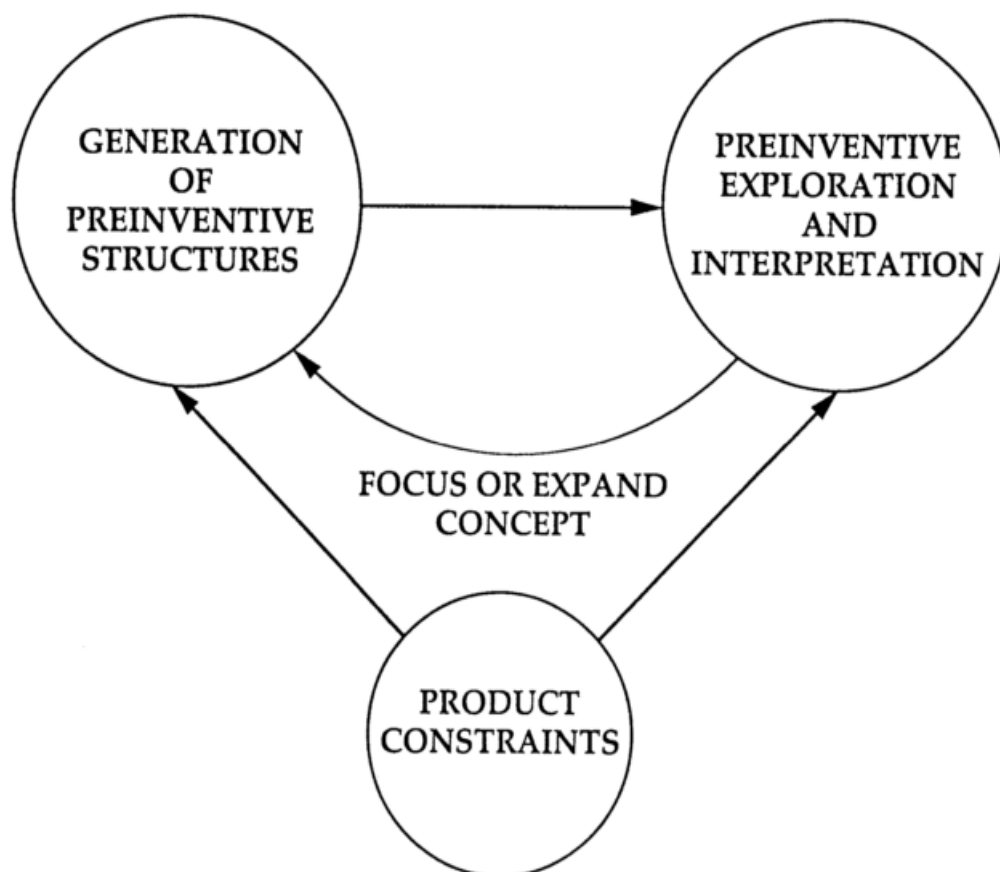


Figure 2.2. The Geneptore Model (Finke, Ward, & Smith in Finke 1996, 388). Used with permission.

Finally, an aspect of the composition process that should be incorporated is

*serendipity*, defined as "a process of *making a mental connection* that has the potential to lead to a valuable outcome, *projecting the value* of the outcome and *taking actions to exploit* the connection, leading to a *valuable outcome*" (Makri & Blandford 2012b, 2, emphasis original). Arguably, serendipity is the confluence of cognitive activity and external stimulation that most often leads to so-called "eureka moments" for creators, and inspires the "how did you come up with such a great idea?" questions from audiences. S. Makri & Ann Blandford (2012a, 2012b) outline a model identifying this cognitive process as something more than luck; rather, it is the convergence of the knowledge and experience to make the mental connection and to recognise the significance of that connection, with the skills necessary to exploit the connection and produce a worthwhile outcome or artefact. Serendipity is likely behind the advent of many narrative evolutions, such as the combination of genres into new forms (tech-noir, space opera); it certainly played a large role in both the creative and critical aspects of this project, and is most clearly identified in Chapter 5's discussion of implicit collaboration.

I have gathered these cognitive and creativity models into a cohesive structure that best represents my composition context and cognition: the Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition (Figure 2.3). This model is based upon the strong foundation provided by Flower & Hayes's Cognitive Process Model (1981), but widens it somewhat beyond the internal cognitive processes to incorporate the overall system of the practitioner's creative context using Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity (1996), allowing for the examination of external influences upon the writing process.

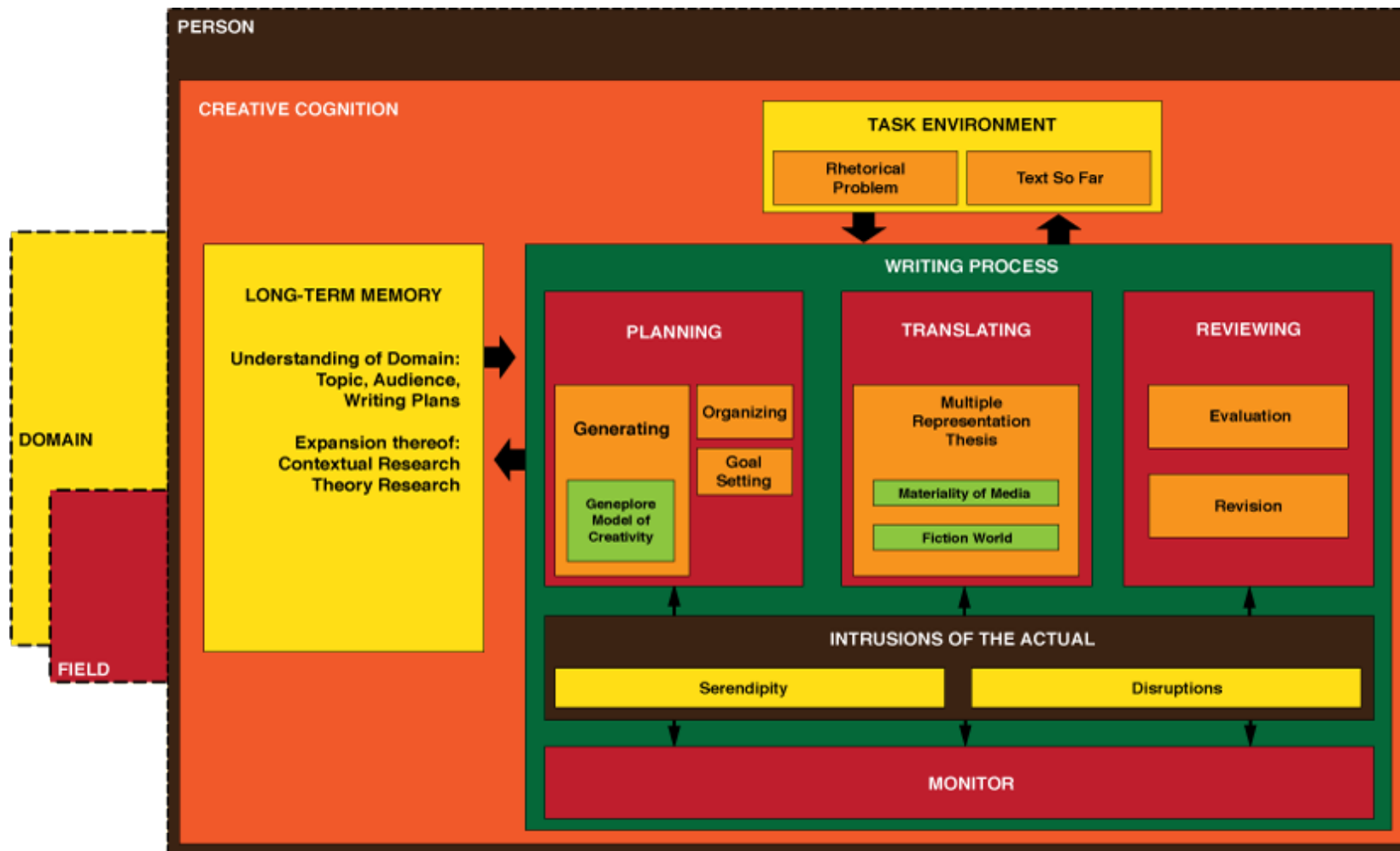


Figure 2.3. The Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition, based on: Systems Model of Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1996); Flower & Hayes's composition Cognitive Process Model (1981) and Multiple Representation Thesis (1984); Geneplore Model (Finke, Ward, & Smith in Finke 1996); Serendipity Model (Makri & Blandford 2012a, 2012b).

Makri & Blandford's 2012 (a, b) model of serendipity is incorporated as a mediating function of the monitoring process, where expanding awareness of the domain, the field, and the emerging text converge to form an optimal state for serendipitous mental connections and discoveries. Within the generating process, I have embedded the Genevieve Model, in order to unpack the aspect of how ideas are shaped and remodelled (Ward, Smith, & Finke in Finke 1996). Flower & Hayes's Multiple Representation Thesis (1984) offers insight into the translation process, whether the practice is mono- or multimodal. The translation process also now includes considerations of *materiality*; though materiality also clearly comes into play in the "product constraints" aspect of the Genevieve Model, it is a significant factor in the translation of narratives, particularly multimodal narratives, as argued in Chapter 3.

Similarly, the *fiction world* has been embedded into the translation process as a distinct element, drawing from Todd Lubart's argument that the writer in the process of translation is constantly shifting between the writing world and that of the fiction: "[t]he fiction world seems to involve productive thinking, improvisation, and a lack of reflective, evaluative thought...In contrast, the writer's world is active, critical, and directive" (2009, 159). While consideration of the fiction world is inherent in monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the text produced so far, there is also a specific aspect of translation in which the fiction world plays out independently from the writer's goals and plans, and thus is worth additional consideration in the model.

This is a model formulated from introspection, self-observation, and reflection upon my own artistic practice, based upon the models discussed in this section; it has not been drawn from larger ethnomethodological studies of other practitioners at work. As such, it may be subject to future adjustments, and it may not be applicable to every individual. By drawing upon more widely accepted models, and integrating the insight of an experienced practitioner engaged in a targeted, practice-based project, however, the Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition gains validity. It serves as a useful model for this project, at the very least, as it enables me to analyse the effects of materials on the translation of narrative (Chapter 3); to examine how serendipity affects idea generation, planning, goal-setting, and translation (Chapter 5); and to discuss the influence of engagement with domain and field on long-term memory and translation (Chapter 6).

It is important to note that while this thesis considers aspects of process from a cognitive approach, the broader questions of creativity addressed in Csikszentmihalyi's

Systems Model (such as when an act becomes a "creative" act) are not addressed here. Similarly, the deeper cognitive processes of where ideas come from, and how unique and novel ideas are formed in terms of the fiction, are generally outside the scope of this project, which specifically examines the activity and outcome of the practice. Cognitive study, for the purposes of this project, has most relevance to Chapter 6, in which I examine how changing the practitioner's knowledge of domain affects the composition process. I have included this model in its entirety, however, as it does offer the opportunity to discuss various aspects of my creative process that previous models do not afford. I also expect that it may serve as a useful model for future work, not only my own, but that of other practitioners and researchers.

### **Post-textual Analysis**

As discussed in previous sections, post-textual analysis provided additional insight into the process and narrative presented, as well as adding robustness to the auto-ethnomethodological observations. While the post-textual analysis methods varied according to the question at hand — whether it involved process or narrative analysis, media or meaning-making — several seminal theories provided a foundation for examining the creative texts. Narratology offered three key directions of analysis: transmedia narratology, largely based upon the theories of Marie-Laure Ryan (2006); cognitive narratology, as presented by David Herman (2007); and unnatural narration, based upon the work of Brian Richardson (2006), Jan Alber, et al. (2010, 2012), Jan Alber & Rüdiger Heinze (2011), and Alice Bell & Jan Alber (2012). Transmedial narratology offers insights into the techniques and structures a text utilises across and within media, which proved useful for comparing the creative artefacts in their analogue and digital forms. Cognitive narratology enabled yet another approach to understanding the process of composition, complementing the auto-ethnomethodological observations and interpretations. Theories of unnatural narration contextualised these texts within the larger literary domain, as well as offering a specific framework to analyse the evolution of my narrative practice into techniques with which I had not previously engaged.

Within the overarching theoretical framework of narratology, I based my examination of the creative artefacts for meaning-making in N. Katherine Hayles's 2002 media-specific analysis (MSA), which facilitated analysis of the materiality of the

multimodal texts, and how that materiality shaped the resulting narrative. This MSA included semiotic analysis of visual grammar and design (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006), of hyperstructures such as navigation and interactivity (Ryan 2006; Bouchardon & Heckman 2012), and of source code<sup>6</sup> (Marino 2006; Montfort 2003, 2011). Though most of the analysis was applied to the narrative as displayed, in order to examine the effects of digital media upon the narratives themselves, source code was examined in specific instances in order to discuss aspects of process and composition.

### **Outline of Method**

The method used in this research (Figure 2.4) is based upon the Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition presented above. This is a practice-led research project, and thus the basic method employed was to engage in the creative practice (composing the analogue and digital versions of *Færwhile*) in order to explore the research question: how does shifting from an analogue creative writing practice to a digital, multimodal composition practice affect the practitioner's process and the narrative artefacts? In addition to the creative practice, significant contextual research was warranted in the areas of: extant digital fictions; media, narrative, and composition theory; and didactic texts on designing, programming, and composing digital texts. As discussed in Chapters 3, 5, and 6, this research not only contributed toward contextualisation and analysis of the creative work, it also had significant impact upon the creative process and artefacts. What follows in this section is a detailed overview of the entire method utilised in this thesis; used in combination with the Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition, it serves as a robust foundation from which to conduct practice-led research in the creative arts.

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6 Mark Marino's 2006 treatise on Critical Code Studies primarily focuses on post-textual analysis of a work's source code; however, it is also relevant to approach source code from a practice-led perspective, examining how the practice of composing a creative work through the material medium of code (which the computer then translates into artefact) affects the composer and the work itself. This is the approach this project has taken with regard to source code.

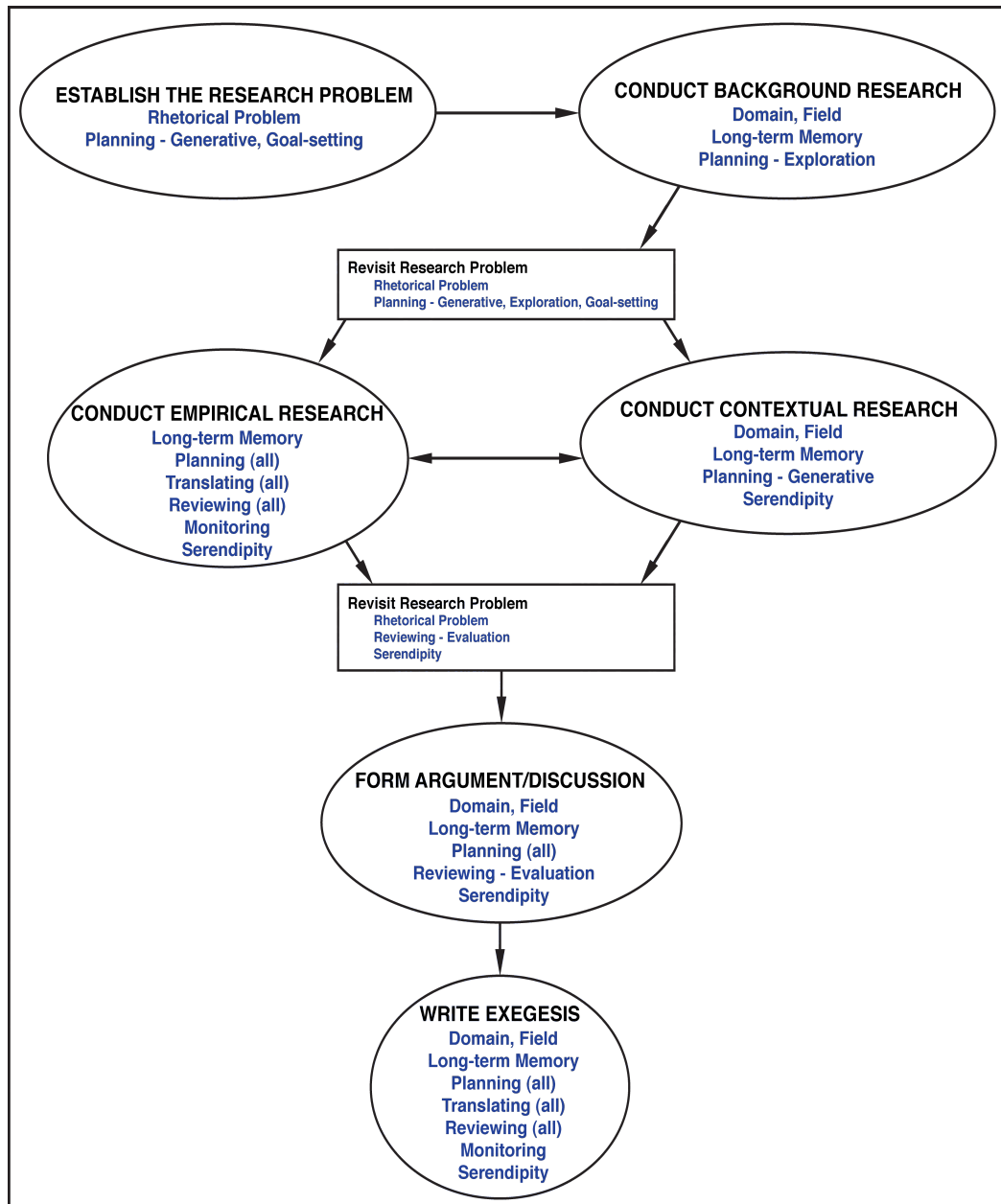


Figure 2.4. Outline of Practice-led Research Method. Elements in blue refer to the Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition outlined in Figure 2.3.

### *Establish the Research Problem*

Establishing the research problem, which could be termed the overall rhetorical problem of the entire project, engages the processes of planning (idea generation and goal-setting). While this initial step appears quite straightforward — identify the area of interest, identify key gaps in knowledge, and formulate a research question designed to fill those gaps — in practice-led research this stage can be nebulous. It can be difficult to identify gaps when the researcher is engaged in an entirely new area or creative endeavour, as a basic level of knowledge and experience is required to, in



essence, know what it is we do not yet know. Practice-led research is often a process of exploration and discovery, with many key insights arriving via serendipity, rather than as part of experiment design. Thus, the initial research question is often vague and typically open-ended, to permit flexibility in the practice and space for such serendipitous discoveries to occur.

In this project, the research question can be stated as previously: How does shifting from an established prose writing practice to a new digital composition practice affect the writer's process and the resulting narratives? This question established a rhetorical situation and implied specific goals: the need for creative texts that permitted exploration and analysis that would answer the question. Thus, the creative text was designed to be coherent as a print novella, yet modular in the digital version, which enabled each digital chapter to experiment with a different digital platform. In order to facilitate an informed approach to the creative practice, however, a fundamental grounding in the domain was required: background research.

### *Conduct Background Research*

This phase of the research is fairly straightforward. It is intended to firmly ground the researcher's long-term memory in knowledge of the relevant domain (in this case, electronic literature, and specifically digital fiction), in terms of both critical theory and contextual creative works. This enables the practice-led researcher to "know what she doesn't know", in order to identify gaps and to engage fully in the planning process: generating and exploring ideas and setting goals for the creative practice. This stage is also commonly known as a literature review, and has the same purposes. With the long-term memory bolstered by this increased awareness of domain, the research question can be revisited to determine whether it remains pertinent or needs to be revised.

In this project, the research question itself remained valid; the background research served largely to promote the planning process of the creative work. Exposure to and close readings of digital fictions (in various platforms such as Flash, interactive fiction, Javascript, hypertext, etc.) offered a reader's perspective on the genre. I was able to identify key aspects that inspired me or added meaning in these texts, in order to plan their incorporation into my own works. These aspects included meaning-making through visuals (imagery and layout), reader participation (interactivity, contribution to

narrative), and navigational structures. The creative texts that initially offered the most significant inspiration were: "Consensus Trance, Part 1" by Andy Campbell (2009) (visual semiotics); *9:05* by Adam Cadre (2000) (reader participation, reflexive narrative tools); *Sand-dancer* by Aaron Reed (2010) (use of medium to reflect cognition); *Inanimate Alice* by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph (2005) (ease of translation to readers new to the medium); and *253* by Geoff Ryman (1996) (navigational structures).

### *Conduct Empirical Research / Continue Contextual Research*

The major phase of research is led by the creative practice, engaging in all aspects of the creative cognitive process. In order to explore my main research question, I designed a creative project that appealed to me as a writer who has previously worked mostly in the fantasy and magical realism genres, that would foster insights into the process of composition, and that would engage in a wide range of narrative media. The text I envisioned initially was a print novella, with each short chapter centring on a specific character, whose narratives were then intertwined throughout the other chapters. I would then adapt this novella into digital fiction, experimenting with a different form of digital media for each chapter. As discussed in Chapter 6, this design went quickly awry in the translation phase, as my composition process underwent significant and unforeseen changes.

Chapter 6 also notes significant effects on the composition process of continuing contextual research in theory and creative works. It could be argued that continuing this contextual research while still engaged in the creative work introduced confounds, raising the question: what proportion of my process and narrative changes was due to the media, and what was due to my growing long-term memory? In such a qualitative study however, quantifying these effects is not possible, and likely not informative in any case. The benefits of further engaging in the new domain weigh far more heavily: the creative artefacts benefited from my increased awareness of narrative structures and multimodal meaning-making, and the critical examination benefited from serendipitous connections I was able to make while still engaged in the creative practice. In fact, all of the significant critical conclusions argued in this thesis arose from the serendipitous connections formed by my concurrent engagement in creative practice and contextual research.

### *Form Argument Leading to Exegesis*

The research question can be revisited and refined at any point in the practice-led research process, and I would argue that it should be frequently examined. As discussed previously, practice-led research is given to exploration and significant moments of discovery, which are largely unpredictable at the start of the project. Thus serendipity can lead to new perspectives on the research, reshaping the project goals throughout. As the primary research activities begin to draw to a conclusion, these serendipitous connections begin to emerge as answers to specific aspects of the research question. *How does digital composition affect process?* is a refinement of the original research question, encountered throughout the creative process as my original plan of work disintegrated (see Chapter 6). *How do digital media affect narrative?* The answers to this question pulled it in two different directions, in terms of materiality (Chapter 3) and narrative perspective (Chapter 4). A wholly serendipitous connection necessitated a significant refinement to the research question — *How does appropriation affect narrative?* — as I discovered that appropriating the digital resources available online significantly affected my creative artefacts, and determined to dig deeper into what those effects were (Chapter 5).

Argument formation and exegesis are set out here as a final step in the research method, though it is clear that the researcher is engaged in argument formation throughout the primary research phase as discoveries are made and serendipity occurs. Nevertheless, more thorough post-textual analysis of the creative artefacts is required to deepen the understanding of these discoveries, and directed critical research is required to contextualise the conclusions within the domain. Thus a new round of research is called for as needed during argument formation and exegesis write-up, which bears strong resemblance to the traditional practice of post-textual analysis and discourse. The exegesis draws upon relevant aspects of the primary and secondary research as required for specific arguments: auto-ethnomethodological observations, post-textual analysis (of both the creative artefacts and contextual creative works), and critical theory.

In this manner, the various strengths of practice-led research, ethnomethodology, cognitive process, and post-textual analysis are combined into a robust method of evaluating the activities of the practitioner/researcher. The limitations of reflective analysis and self-observation are offset by a directed research plan and

post-textual examination of both creative artefacts and *in situ* notes and drafts. The remainder of this thesis serves as an example of this research method, and is an effort not only to reflect upon the practice of these specific creative artefacts, but to offer significant insight into the practice and theory of digital writing and digital fiction.

## Chapter 3

### "The medium is us":<sup>7</sup>

#### How the materiality of digital storytelling media affects the narrative strategies of technotexts

The materiality of fiction narratives is, ironically, a rather intangible concept, particularly as the notion of materiality traditionally relates to specifically tangible tools of creation — such as the painter's brush or the sculptor's clay. In presenting her theory of the technotext,<sup>8</sup> however, N. Katherine Hayles calls for media-specific analysis in the literary arts, one that includes an examination of materiality, accounting for "how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact" in terms of both physical manipulation and conceptual frameworks<sup>9</sup> (2002, 33). Hayles argues that it is the conjunction of the physical embodiment of technotexts (whether semi-tangible in digital form, or as fully physical as a book) with their embedded verbal signifiers that constructs both plurimodal meaning and an implicit construct of the user/reader (130-1). This chapter seeks to examine the dynamic on the other side of technotexts: that of the creator and the text. Specifically, this chapter explores how the materiality of digital media contributes to a layered metaphor that delivers meaning, reflects on the cognitive processes (the writer's and the reader's) of navigation, and generates a dynamic narrative structure through user interaction.

The argument for media-specific analysis is important in both post-textual analysis and practice-led analysis. The materiality of a storytelling medium such as film is a fairly straightforward notion to grasp, because many of the tools and artefacts of the medium are physically graspable: cameras, celluloid, reels, scissors, props, lenses, filters, lights, etc. The materiality of digital artefacts, however, lies only superficially in the haptic hardware of screens, keyboards, and mice; the materiality of modes, navigation, and interaction must also be explored for their effects on metaphor and meaning. Serge Bouchardon & Davin Heckman identify three levels of materiality

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7 Hayles 2001, 37.

8 Defined as texts that "[connect] the technology that produces texts to the texts' verbal constructions" (Hayles 2002, 26).

9 This is the working definition of "materiality" that will be used in this chapter. For further discussion of materiality, see Matthew Kirschenbaum's 2008 *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (focusing on the materiality of the apparatus) and Johanna Drucker's 1994 *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art*.

in digital literary works: the figure of a semiotic form, the grasp required to physically interact with the work, and the memory of the work — its whole compiled from the parts of code, hardware, and user/reader experience that form meaning (2012, n.p.). This memory "relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (Nora in Pence 2002, 346). Without consideration of these material aspects of digital works, "we have little hope of forging a robust and nuanced account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies" (Hayles 2002, 19). More importantly, without a similarly robust and nuanced understanding of how these technologies affect process and artefact, digital storytellers may be hard-pressed to craft works that create these levels of metaphor and meaning through the interplay of apparatus and text.

Often such an understanding is not a conscious process — many writers and artists engage with their chosen medium through tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995), an instinctive understanding of the materials at hand, gained through exposure to others' works and through their own experiences. In other words, the explicit study of the materiality of a medium is not always required for artistic success, however that may be judged. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, digital media have a significant effect on the outcome of the artefact itself; awareness of these effects, their variations according to hardware and software, and the affordances of these various materials offers the digital writer greater insight and capability to craft his/her texts for the desired meaning.

### **The Materiality of Technotexts**

The following sections examine the materiality of technotexts, exploring how the material aspects of multimodality, navigation, and interaction influence the literary artefact in terms of structure and meaning. Each section presents examples of how the materiality of texts affects narrative meaning, and examines the elements of the *Færwhile* narrative, as well as other contextual technotexts, that demonstrate these effects.

#### *Multimodality*

Digital texts are frequently multimodal, creating meaning through text, image, sound, and movement. While these modes may be used to illustrate one another, as

when an image is used to illustrate an article, or merely to provide a pleasingly aesthetic textscape, most multimodal works create meaning through the interplay of the modes used:

Meanings in multimedia are not fixed and additive (the word meaning plus the picture meaning), but multiplicative (word meaning modified by an image context, image meaning modified by textual context), making a whole far greater than the simple sum of its parts (Lemke 1998, 312).

This multiplicative quality of multimodal texts demands a level of attention from the composer, an awareness of how each component contributes to and affects the meaning of the whole.

An example of this multiplicative meaning, or "pluricode" (Saemmer 2012), can be found in Andy Campbell's 2009<sup>10</sup> "Consensus Trance, Part 1", the first chapter of his multimodal and multimedia work *Nightingale's Playground*. The narrator in this Flash story is driven by an inner conflict, a desire to discover what of his memory is real, and what is merely delusion. Campbell uses text, image, interactivity, light, colour, movement, and sound to express this inner conflict. The story (as it existed online at the time of this writing) begins in the "bedsit" sequence, toned in browns and grays to reflect the sour, depressed mood of the narrator, the peeling wallpaper and stained mattress of the barely furnished room reflecting his dire circumstances. The room is poorly lit, sunlight from the one window unable to reveal the hidden shadows. This searching quality is reflected thus in the mise en scène of the sequence, as well as the action the reader must carry out to reveal the lexias: mouseovers of the entire screen reveal four segments of text, the narrator describing his circumstances, his search in both physical form and mental memory of a high school friend he is no longer sure exists outside his own mind. The modes in this sequence coalesce into a "coherent coupling" (Saemmer 2012), as the meanings of each (colour, lighting, text, image) combine to denote a coherent whole, shaping the narrator's shadowed and fragmented memory.

Multiple modes can also be used in "de-coherent couplings" (Saemmer 2012), in which the meanings of each mode seem to contradict one another, perhaps leading to a third meaning. Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* presents an apparently straightforward character, script-wise, in Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), the blade runner tasked with hunting and killing four rogue "replicants" (androids) who have

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<sup>10</sup> The version that is analysed in this chapter was last accessed in March 2012. The text may have since undergone revisions.

illegally escaped their duties on extraterrestrial colonies to return to Earth in an attempt to extend their own short lives. The replicants, in both script and visual elements of the film, continually pose the question "What does it mean to be human?" Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) demonstrates this central theme through the text, the script, in his actions to find his creator, his drive to extend his own life, stressing his own humanity in statements such as "We're not computers, Sebastian. We're physical" and through his final speech that encapsulates his memories, his life. The visuals offer a cohesive coupling of this question, through their repeated use of eye and animal imagery (Skains and Chambers, in preparation).

The character of Deckard, however, presents an example of de-coherent coupling. The scripted dialogue presents Deckard as a hardened blade runner, never questioning his own status as human. The visuals, however, offer a contradictory meaning: Deckard is frequently associated with the colour green, committing to neither the blue associated with the mechanical replicants, nor the yellow representing natural life. Further, Deckard is linked through his own dream imagery and Gaff's (Edward James Olmos) origami animals to the figure of the unicorn, which provides more contradiction around the question of his own humanity. The visual of the dream unicorn questions Deckard's status as human; he is the only character represented by a mythological creature (Burt 2002, 74). Similarly, the paper unicorn Gaff leaves for Deckard in the final sequence conflicts with the notion of Deckard as fully human: how can Gaff know the contents of Deckard's dreams unless they are the programmed memories of a replicant? "The controversial unicorn [image] perhaps reflects Deckard's hidden replicant desire to become something mythical, something that no longer exists in his world: truly alive" (Skains and Chambers, in preparation).

An examination of "Lost, Seeking Found", the first chapter in *Færwhile*, reveals both coherent and de-coherent coupling, even within the opening frames. The background image is a beach scene: bright skies, families playing in the sand, signifying summer and warmth, togetherness and family. The text, however, tells the tale of a brother and sister who, orphaned, are separated by the foster system, each lost to one another; the narrative content of the text against the beach background offers a de-coherent coupling. The tonal quality of the image, however, also offers a coherent coupling with the narrative content: the colours are overexposed, turning the bright sky into a flat white, the shadows in the foreground black and cold, signalling a harsh, almost alien environment. Given the narrative content, this would indeed be an alien



environment to the brother and sister in question, who have never experienced the comfort and apparent normalcy of a simple day at the beach amid family and friends. Similarly, the verbal style of the text offers yet another de-coherent coupling. The text uses a lilting, storybook voice, beginning with "Once upon a time," which signals a fable with a comforting ending; this comfort is quickly belied by the narrative and visual shift into the deepest of the shadows on the screen. Combined, these two modes — the visual and the written text — offer layers of meaning in this sequence that neither offer alone, opening a story whose ontological level is about two lost siblings seeking one another in an expression of love and family, and whose metaphorical level reveals the manipulations and machinations of external and internal powers that, in the end, leave everyone unfound.

It is only through consideration of the full complexity of the multimodality of these texts that a full realisation of their meaning can be reached. Similar to Hayles's note on the recursive quality of varying media, so do multiple modes within one work "engage in a recursive dynamic" (2002, 30) to reflect and refract meaning through various layers, levels, and angles of multimodal fictional narratives.

### *Navigation*

Navigation in texts provides yet another of these layers, forming a significant "part of the work's signifying structure" (Hayles 2005, 91), offering a mechanism for "active manipulation of features on the level of discourse and presentation" (Drucker 2008, 121). Narratives can employ unicursal navigation, a singular pathway through the arc — as typically offered in the novel — or multicursal, offering multiple paths through, as offered in hypertexts (Hayles 2001; Aarseth 1997). The technology of the printed page, bound into an ordered codex — the materiality of the book — largely dictates a unicursal navigation of the narrative within, as the reader engages in the ingrained action of reading from left to right (in Western cultures), top to bottom, front to back. Some texts, digital antecedents or "cybertext[s] in antiquity" (Aarseth 1997, 9), attempt to disrupt this expected unicursality by unbinding the codex and shuffling the pages (Mark Saporta's 1962 *Composition No. 1, Roman*), directing the reader to pages or chapters "out of order" (Julio Cortázar's 1966 *Hopscotch*), or deviating from the norms of narrative structure (Italo Calvino's 1981 *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*).

The materiality of digital media, however, readily affords multicursal

navigation. Per Persson (1998) identifies four types of digital navigation: the spatial (up-down, left-right) navigation popular in graphics-based games; the social navigation present in discussion forums and social media sites denoting how much and what type of activity is occurring; the semantic navigation connecting objects in the digital environment through "some *semantic* connection like *similar, alike, more/less general, associated*" (Persson 1998, 191, emphasis original); and the navigation inherent in narrative structure. The navigational possibilities in digital media are thus expanded to a significant degree; whereas unicursal narratives normally employ one method of navigation (narrative structure), digital media afford many different combinations of navigation within a single work. Digital fiction most commonly affords spatial, semantic, and narrative navigation; fictions engaging in social media tools such as forums and blogs also engage social navigation. Michael Joyce's 1987 *afternoon: a story* offers a multicursal path through the narrative, as the reader navigates through the segments of the hypertext through semantic links, digging deeper into the narrative structure even as repeated lexias reveal meaning through their very repetition. Emily Short's 2006 *Bronze*, an interactive fiction (IF) adaptation of the "Beauty and the Beast" fable, offers spatial navigation through the Beast's palace, the reader navigating the narrative structure by exploring the rooms and objects afforded by the interactive fiction.

Both are examples of "wayfinding" navigation (Benyon and Höök in Persson 1998, 192) — the reader/navigator has a clear quest to discover what has happened on the afternoon of the accident in the case of the former, and a quest to save the Beast in the latter. "Exploration" navigation, the reader/user exploring a text with no clear goal or to get an overview, can also occur in hyperfiction (questing to reveal all lexias), interactive fiction (visiting spaces and examining objects that contribute to storyworld but not necessarily narrative), and most obviously games such as online role-playing games or virtual worlds that provide a significant level of spatial navigation.

While "Lost, Seeking Found" seeks to engage the reader in the familiar straightforward narrative structure navigation in its role as the introductory piece, "Streams Slipping in the Dark" and "Awake the Mighty Dread" offer more complex navigation strategies through spatial exploration and semantic associations. The navigation paradigm in "Streams" mirrors the narrative's structure: the characters are wandering separately across a landscape, eventually merging together. The imagery in "Streams" is that of a map; the reader must navigate the space of the map, and seek out

clickable areas (semantic links) that reveal storybook chunks of narrative related to those areas. The more story they find, the closer they progress to the castle, where all the characters eventually converge and this sequence concludes. The piece progresses in sections; each section is exploratory, enabling multicursal pathways within, but the sections themselves progress unicursally. Exploration through spatial navigation is possible in small areas, in other words, but overall the reader is manipulated down a unicursal narrative pathway toward the denouement of the segment. The technotext thus provides a navigational mirror of the narrator's ontological manipulation: just as the Trickster has manipulated the characters down their various paths (while still allowing for deviances along the way), so too does the navigation in "Streams" manipulate the reader through the narrative, reflecting the underlying metaphor of the tale.

"Awake"'s navigational structure is similar to *Bronze's*, with opportunities for exploration through the spaces of the storyworld, but also a wayfinding structure in that the player-character is navigating Lilly through the world toward the goal of finding her brother. The possible pathways of interactive fiction are by nature multicursal and unicursal simultaneously: the player-character's choices move them through the narrative in many possible pathways, but the overarching goal of the IF is to "win" or "succeed" by achieving a successful traversal (Montfort 2011). This again, much like in "Streams", requires manipulation of the player-character toward actions along a unicursal path, enabling a "successful" ending to the narrative, in which the player-character as Lilly escapes this world with Hal as her companion. As the reader explores and discovers, and occasionally gets lost, so too does Lilly; the exploratory nature of IF enhances the narrative metaphor of the lost little girl, navigating strange places with strange expectations.

Through devices such as the hyperlink, spatial movement (whether text- or graphics-based), semantic feedback in various modes, and even emerging social tools such as integration of social media into narrative spaces, digital media afford a staggering degree of possibilities for the recombination of narrative. Johanna Drucker, in her examination of the navigational effects of graphic devices, argues that the cognitive processes that piece together narrative existents and events into a coherent story (regardless of order or form) function not only because of the content of the text, but also because of how it is ordered and presented (2008). "Depending on how the designer chooses to organize the [digital] environment, it will give rise to different

types of experiences in the user/player/reader/navigator" (Persson 1998, 191), and possibly to previously unimagined structures of narrative as well.

### *Interaction*

Digital interfaces afford various levels and ways for the reader/user to interact with the text. These interactions typically arise from the physical gestures (typing, scrolling, mousing over, clicking, tapping) necessary to use most digital devices. Their effects within the digital environment, however, can range from a simple click to advance to the next section of story, to highly engaged interactions such as those requiring gameplay or typed commands. "The reader's physical as well as cognitive encounters with a text as much form the basis of the text as the words and links provided by the author" (Nack 2009, 15-16); the text is realised through the physical and cognitive interaction between reader and apparatus.

Bouchardon & Heckman's notion of a "figure of manipulation" in digital works provides a rhetorical model for evaluating how gestures of navigation and manipulation (mousing, keying, etc.) add elements of metaphor, metonym, and synecdoche to the text "based on the user's interaction with the interface" (2012, n.p.). The capability for the user to interact with digital elements and by doing so discover more text than is initially apparent on the screen adds significant depth to the digital work. "When interactive text is manipulated by the reader, the linguistic sign is again coupled to an iconic sign: a sequence of gestural manipulations performed for a purpose" (Saemmer 2012, 8).

These gestures become what Saemmer terms "semiotic units of manipulation" (2012, 8), as certain manipulations become associated with particular meanings. In Alan Bigelow's 2006 interactive self-portrait *Because You Asked*, several figures of manipulation are at work. The reader must click on icons to reveal lexias (which are presented in both text and audio), a simple gesture calling forth the next segment of the piece. With each lexia, however, a segment of the artist's portrait is revealed. In the final sequence, a mouseover of the revealed portrait erases the image wherever the cursor moves. The mouseover gesture signifies erasure, wiping out a fleeting image. Davin Heckman describes the significance of this interaction:

Rather than the act of interacting via a purely technological interface, "Because You Asked" implies that reader involvement takes place at a more fundamentally human level, that of curiosity, imagination, and consciousness, suggesting, perhaps, that we see ourselves as much as anything else in the things that we look for (2009, n.p.).

While all of the digital chapters in *Færwhile* engage the reader in some form of interaction, from the hyperlinks in "Puerta Cerrada de Unman" to the text commands required in "Awake the Mighty Dread", "Swallowing the Tale's Tail" most directly ties interaction to narrative meaning. In this final chapter, the interface is quite simple: on each screen, an icon appears on the screen, composed of three different figures, each representing a narrator in the work (Lilly, the Trickster, and the Storyteller). The icon that is presented with each particular lexia hints visually at the covert narrator influencing that section of text. With each click, the icon morphs, shifting between the metaleptic narrators Lilly, the Trickster, and the Storyteller. This shift, brought about by the simple interaction of clicking, signifies the underlying themes of manipulation and of storycraft, questioning perhaps the validity of the entire tale: whether the characters of Ben, Lilly, and Amelia exist, or whether they are simply constructs used by Trickster and the Storyteller in their battle of tales. Likewise, the question then extrapolates — who are Trickster and the Storyteller but the metaleptic presence of the author? — and interpolates — alternatively, is Lilly the author of all, writing her entire story in a dream, filtering in pieces of reality and myth? Overall, the interaction questions the act of narration, an inherent function of technotext: the materiality of the text presents questions about the actual meaning of the text.

Whereas in the novel one strives for the physical materiality of the text (paragraph breaks, page turns) to fade away as the reader immerses in the narrative, the gestures and manipulations involved in interacting with digital texts can add yet another layer of depth, metaphor, and theme to the narrative. "To the extent the user enters the imaginative world of this environment and is structured by her interactions with it, she also becomes a simulation, an informational pattern circulating through the global network that counts as the computational version of human community" (Hayles 2002, 49). The actions and manipulations required by digital texts encourage the reader to become a part of the text, rather than apart from it.

## **Conclusion**

I have detailed my writerly process, and the effects of composing in digital media upon it, in Chapter 6. Materiality is a significant contributor to that evolution in process. The materiality of digital media, and of specific media platforms such as Flash or Inform7, implies certain affordances and limitations unique to these forms. As such,

the writer's approach to narrative, as well as the structure and shape of the narrative itself, adjusts and transforms in order to engage fully with the new media.

Hayles notes that "electronic authors are normally involved in every aspect of the production process, which includes the appearance of the interface, the linking mechanism, animation, audio files, and image generation and placement" (2001, 23). While some authors collaborate with digital designers and programmers, I chose to undertake this more embodied approach in order to gain a more thorough insight into how the work's materiality influences author and narrative. Digital media offer the capability to produce multiple modes equally, thanks to the underlying programming that transforms code into image as easily as it does text or audio. Based on this foundation, the electronic author can transduce these modes: shifting semiotic material across modes, layering meaning through multimodality, navigation, and interaction.

As this chapter demonstrates, extensive and nuanced knowledge of how these modes affect and transduce meaning is required to make full use of them in creating digital narratives (Kress 2003). The layering of multiple communication modes within a single text produces a multiplicative meaning (Lemke 1998), as different elements interact to offer either coherent or de-coherent coupling (Saemmer 2012) that shape the underlying metaphor of the narrative. Spatial, semantic, narrative, and occasionally social navigation can be used to mimic actions of exploration, to provide associated links of meaning, to influence the reader to construct a path through a potential narrative, its metaphor structured in part through these navigational clicks and choices. Even the very action of entering commands, clicking on buttons and links, mechanically spinning the narrative wheel through the digital device is a choice that affects the reader's experience of the narrative, and thus the communication of the narrative's metaphor and meaning. Digital media offer this dizzying array of narrative devices in addition to those that are familiar through reading and literary study, and thus the authorial choices for creation of narrative are significantly increased beyond the unicursal presentation of written language. The author of the technotext must appreciate and use all of the semiotic and cognitive capabilities of the apparatus at hand.

Interfaces that make use of multiple modes, hyperlinked or rhizomatic structures, memetic navigation and gestural manipulation can be argued to mimic the neuronal networks and cognitive processes of the human brain (Hayles 2002; Ensslin 2012). "The multisensory nature of most, possibly all, of the neocortex forces us to

abandon the notion that the senses ever operate independently during real-world cognition" (Ghasanfar & Schroeder in Gibbons 2010, 100). Flower & Hayes's 1984 Multiple Representation Thesis poses the notion that even when writing prose (with its monomodal, unicursive outcomes), the author's ideation is multimodal, inspired by images, sounds, interactions and associations, as well as by language; the act of prose writing is a process of translating and ordering these modes and ideas into ordered language. From a writer's perspective, digital media afford a more direct transcription of the original concepts, as Alan Sondheim notes: "As far as writing is concerned – I don't care whether or not I'm writing/sounding/visualizing; it's all a mix, all developed cross-application, cross-platform, cross-technology, cross-output devices" (2006, 376). Rather than constraining the ideas and possibilities to one unicursal narrative, digital media afford multiple possibilities to present in a single text, a "text-as-apparatus as environment rather than as [a] traditional narrative" (Weight 2006, 434).

This material mapping (Hayles 2001, 31) transfers to the reader of these texts, as "the reader's physical as well as cognitive encounters with the text as much form the basis of the text as the words and links provided by the author" (Nack 2009, 15-16). André Gaudreault & Philippe Marion argue that the text's fabula is manifest not only in the syuzhet's text, but also the structure of the syuzhet (2004, n.p.); the materiality of the syuzhet's medium not only informs but actually *forms* the text, "alter[ing] the conditions of reception" (Ryan 2009, para 4). Matthew Kirschenbaum posits that the reader's "forensic imagination" is thus activated, as the "process collapses into product" (2008, 253). Choices made in the navigation of the text, gestures carried out in order to explore the text, and the multiplicative meanings triggered by the multimodal layers coalesce into a mental model of the narrative (Persson 1998, 193), relying upon the same cognitive processes in the reader to construct the text as the writer engaged in creating it.

## Chapter 4

### **The Fragmented Digital Gaze: The effects of multimodal composition on narrative perspective**

Seymour Chatman proposes that narrative is a semiotic structure, its form (discourse) signifying its content (story) (1978). He includes in his concept of narrative both traditional literary narratives and visual such as film, which is echoed in more recent narratological theory.<sup>11</sup> If narrative is a semiotic structure, then it follows that the modes employed in its construction affect its expression; Chatman argues that visual expression such as film has particular affordances (detail, realism) that differ from written expression (emotion, thoughts) (cf. Hayles 2002, Ryan 2006). This chapter explores the effects of multimodal composition on narrative expression in digital media, particularly in terms of narrative perspective and ontology. Specifically, this chapter argues that the unique affordances and conventions of digital composition facilitate unnatural narration in the form of altered narrative perspective, multiple narration, and metalepsis.

Jan Alber notes that the structures of fictional narratives continuously employ new frames and unconventional techniques in the discourse in order to constantly refresh the message of the story; the field of "unnatural narratology" has emerged<sup>12</sup> to study how these unnatural elements create new genres and engage the reader's cognitive architectures in determining the message of the underlying story (2011). Alber defines unnatural narratives as those that incorporate "physically [and logically] impossible scenarios and events" (2009, 80), which is a very broad definition that includes storyworlds<sup>13</sup> that operate outside known laws of physics (such as fantasy) as well as

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11 Marie-Laure Ryan notes that Roland Barthes defined narrative quite broadly in terms of media (including oral and written language, visual media, movement, painting, mime, etc.); the field subsequently narrowed its focus to primarily written texts largely thanks to the work of Gérard Genette (2006, 3-4). More recent narratological theory, including that from Ryan, N. Katherine Hayles, and David Herman, re-establishes the transmedial properties of narrative.

12 The term "unnatural" is not a comment upon the narratives themselves, not to imply they are broken or deplorable, but as a counterpart to Monika Fludernik's theory of "natural" narratology. For further exploration, see Fludernik 1996; Alber, et al. 2010; Fludernik 2012; and Alber, et al. 2012.

13 Defined as "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate...as they work to comprehend a narrative... mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response" (Herman, et al. 2005, 570).



deconstructions of the anthropomorphic narrator and traditional human character (Alber & Heinze 2011, 6). As much of my work is in the genre of fantasy and magical realism and would thus be deemed unnatural by this definition, it is useful to refine this definition according to Brian Richardson (2011). Richardson makes a distinction between mimetic, non-mimetic, and anti-mimetic narratives, and restricts the unnatural to the latter: "mimetic attempts to reproduce the actual; non-mimetic doesn't bother (fairy tales, etc.), and anti-mimetic points out its own constructedness, the artificiality of many of its techniques, and its inherent fictionality" (2011, 31). Henrik Nielson suggests further refinement, a "schema that distinguishes between four categories by combining the natural/unnatural dichotomy with the conventional/unconventional dichotomy" (2011, 85), placing oral storytelling and conversational narration in the natural/conventional aspect; realist literary narratives with omniscient narration in the unnatural/conventional; stream of consciousness in natural/unconventional; and experimental, postmodern works in the unnatural/unconventional. This chapter examines discourse-level narrative structures, exploring how the specific form of digital media affords and even facilitates unnatural (and, according to Nielson, unconventional) narration, rather than impossible worlds or events at story-level, as *Færwhile* is a fantasy tale and thus could be considered unnatural by its very conception.

The chapter begins with a brief examination of my prose practice prior to this project, establishing my previous entrenchment in conventional — if not entirely natural, according to Alber and Nielson — narrative. Following that is an examination of how the conventions of particular digital genres naturalise unnatural perspectives such as second-person, and encourage the digital writer to enter into multiple narration. The final section explores how the nature of composing digital texts — engaging in many levels of cognitive activity — facilitates transgression of the narrative levels through metalepsis.

### **Prose Practice: Conventional Mimetic Fiction**

Mimetic fiction resembles biography in some form, either as third-person narration or first-person narration in an autobiographical fashion (Richardson 2006, 6). Traditional prose fiction, especially realism, attempts to "[imitate] actions in the real world" (Chatman 1978, 19), a textualised form of Aristotle's *praxis*. While, as noted

above, my prose fiction is not necessarily natural by a broad definition, as it mostly falls into fantasy or magical realism, it certainly operates within the realm of conventional mimetic fiction.

Of my five published short stories, four are written in third-person mimetic biography: "Ribbons" (2000), "A Queen for a King" (2008), "Drowning Jonathan" (2009), and "Last Stop Bar & Grill" (2010). "Ribbons" and "A Queen for a King" use past tense verb structure; the remainder use present tense, which Nielson notes began as an unconventional technique in the 1990s, but swiftly became familiar (2011, 85), particularly by the time I was writing and publishing. "Ribbons" is the only piece of realism in my published works, though my 2005 Master's thesis novel, *The Devil's in the Fried Chicken*, is also presented as realism of an autobiographical nature (first-person, past tense). The progression from third-person, past-tense, realist fiction ("Ribbons") to first-person, present-tense, genre fiction ("Wish in One Hand", 2008) demonstrates a desire to experiment with new techniques, to make the narrative new and fresh; it demonstrates "a growing impatience with the illusionistic rhetoric of conventional fiction" (Richardson 2006, 136). My work since my last publication ("Last Stop Bar & Grill", 2010) demonstrates this growing impatience, as it shows a progressively more extreme deviation from the conventional.

### **Digital Conventions: Naturalising the Conventionally Unnatural**

Richardson notes that literature has moved away from third-person omniscient forms, toward the more unconventional uses of unreliable narrators, second-person and "we" narration, and mixed forms; away from the human voice and the psychological, toward the non- and quasi-human and "dissolution of consciousness into textuality" (2006, 13). Digital texts, in particular, have naturalised some of these unconventional narrative structures: Stuart Moulthrop notes that "hypertext fictions exemplify and call attention to the very form of networks" (Moulthrop 2011, n.p.); Astrid Ensslin & Alice Bell argue that "[t]extual *you* features widely across digital, interactive texts, which allow *you* to bring about a species of ontological violation that is not possible in printed texts" (2012, 5, emphasis original); Marie-Laure Ryan notes that textual mapping has led to "the conceptualization of hypertext narrative in terms of spatial metaphors" (2006, 141), making use of spatial elements in narrative that are difficult to communicate in print alone. The conventions of digital, interactive texts such as

interactive fiction, hyperfictions, and games has familiarised readers with formerly unnatural narrative techniques: second-person narration, nonlinear navigation, and even ontological metalepsis. This section focuses on the first of these techniques, second-person narration, and how certain digital genres (particularly the more ludic forms) naturalise this formerly unnatural narrative perspective. It examines two creative pieces: "FuturePics LoveSounds" (Appendix A), which was influenced by social media shifting narrative emphasis to the "you"; and "Awake the Mighty Dread", wherein the conventions of interactive fiction naturalise second-person narration.

*"FuturePics LoveSounds": Standard Form Second-Person*

The second-person perspective puts the reader into the story as the protagonist, placing the reader as both narrator and narratee (Richardson 2006, 20). While participants in social media such as Facebook typically compose their status updates in first-person<sup>14</sup>, the second-person perspective is frequently used as posters urge their network to watch videos, sign petitions, share links and statuses, etc. More consistently, the prompts and narrative perspective of the platform are in second-person: Facebook's status field, always present and prominent, asks "What's on your mind?", or similar variations (Facebook 2013; Lee 2011). The Facebook user is both narrator and narratee; Ensslin & Bell's argument that this ambiguity causes readers to "reposition the referent of the *you* flexibly between virtual and actual worlds, between intra- and extradiegetic levels, and between protagonist, characters, narrator, narratee, implied reader, and actual reader" (2012, 2) applies not only to their examination of hyperfiction, but to Facebook "narratives" as well.

The choice of perspective in "FuturePics LoveSounds" — standard form second (Richardson 2006, 19) — also emphasises ambiguity over clear character identity, and "threatens the ontological stability of the fictional world" (Richardson 2006, 20) as it is unclear if the "you" indicates the narrator or the reader. These elements of ambiguity and destabilisation serve "FuturePics LoveSounds" particularly well, as the protagonist (the "you") is confronted with his own frightening future, and eventually his own choices leading up to that future. The online space that launches this investigation, FaceBook, provides a similarly ambiguous environment in terms of identity: the "you"

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<sup>14</sup> The Facebook status update prompt prior to March 2009 was "[username] is", which resulted in largely third person updates (e.g., "John is having dinner with his best mate"). The prompt was changed in March 2009 to "What's on your mind?", permitting more flexibility and a shift to primarily first person perspective in the status updates. See Lee 2011 for further discussion on this topic.

character cannot differentiate his FaceBook "friends" from one another enough to determine whether or not he actually knows the person sending him the curious photographs. The second-person perspective makes the ambiguity and destabilisation that the character feels an intimate association for the reader. The reader develops a sense of connectivity to the "you" character, and through that a degree of agency that would not be present in an alternative perspective. This sense of agency achieves its maximum level in the story's resolution: the last line "The choice is yours" asks the reader to determine, through their imagination, how the story ends, in any permutation.

Drawing upon Brian Richardson's 2006 examination of unnatural or extreme narration in contemporary fiction, the recurring theme amongst unnatural narrative perspectives (of which second-person standard narration is only one choice) is an attempt to step away from a mimetic perspective. Heavy use of pronouns (or the lack thereof) blurs the lines between characters within a story, between characters and readers, between narrators and narratees; an effect suggesting the notion that all are one and yet none are any. "I" is only defined inasmuch as it is a part of "you" and "we" and "they", and vice versa. Use of FaceBook as the launching environment for this story enhances this blurring, as its individual inputs coalesce into a streaming feed of cacophonous and often repetitive or overlapping voices, links, and photos. Use of second-person perspective, in its ambiguity, destabilisation, and its eventual hand-over to the reader of the story's resolution, raises many questions, including who "you" is, who the main character is, and what role the reader is meant to play. In doing so, the fundamental questions of identity for both character and reader serve as foundation for the piece.

*"Awake the Mighty Dread": Multiple Positioning through Second-Person*

The analogue version of "Awake the Mighty Dread" is narrated by a covert narrator (Chatman 1978), primarily in third-person with occasional second-person reference; the narrator is not a character within this particular tale, but a voice is clearly established, as demonstrated in the opening lines:

Once upon a space of time, a young girl set off on a journey.  
Hmm. That's not quite right. Better to say the young girl was set  
upon a journey, by way of being lost. For if you are lost, you must travel  
somewhere, otherwise you will never be found. (23)

The instance of second-person narration here most closely aligns with Richardson's

hypothetical form, in its use of the imperative, future verb tense, and an "unambiguous distinction between the narrator and narratee" in which the "protagonist is a possible future version of the narratee" (Richardson 2006, 29). This use of second-person perspective is present even in the first draft of the analogue story, perhaps owing to the influence of my engagement with interactive fiction (IF) as discussed in Chapter 6, strengthened by my planning activities for translating the tale into an IF in its digital counterpart.

Second-person perspective is a standard convention for IF discourse, expressed in both standard form in the diegetic replies<sup>15</sup> and hypothetical form in the reports. Ryan notes that "IF is one of the rare narrative forms where the use of 'you' enters into a truly dialogical rather than merely rhetorical relation with an Other" (2006, 134); the referential "you" is not merely a cognitive trick of perspective, but an invitation to command, act, and participate in directing the narrative, leading to Nick Montfort's "potential narratives" (2003). IF's convention of second-person narrative reflects its convention of multiple narrative possibilities, its "multiple positionings" permitting readers to both engage in the thematic story and to identify with an "individualized narratee persona" (Mildorf 2012, 77); "Awake" exemplifies this effect, as it allows the reader to identify with Lilly, to fear her nightmares and try to shape her more pleasant (if fantastic) waking dream with interaction and commands. In this case, the threat of ontological instability that Richardson notes is inherent in second-person narration (2006, 20) is mitigated by the fact that it is a convention of IF: without the reader-player/character identification afforded by second-person narration, the communication of thematic metaphor would be reduced.

### **Hyperlinked Characters: Multiple Narration**

Nodes, like second-person narration in IF, are conventional structures of hyperfictions. As encapsulated sections of narrative separated by hyperlinks, they are ideal structures for changes in focalisation, not the least because they are purposely orchestrated structures rather than arbitrary page breaks, allowing for the "added opportunity to represent breaks (or leaps) of consciousness" (Ciccoricco 2012, 261). My aim with the overall *Færwhile* project was to create a storyworld in which a

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<sup>15</sup> Nick Montfort distinguishes between the outputs of the interactive fiction generator: "replies" refer to diegetic narration of storyworld existents and events; "reports" refer to non-diegetic output, such as parsing errors and clarifications (2011).

potentially infinite number of characters' narratives could unfold and intertwine, whether written by myself or others. This intention is evident in the characters and storylines presented in this project: three characters whose stories eventually cross and converge (Ben, Lilly, Amelia), as well as characters whose stories are not yet fulfilled (Hal the robot frog prince, Gretchen the weaver). The potential to hyperlink these characters in the digital — planning multiple potential narratives for each — encouraged me to enter multiple narrative perspectives in the translation process, to follow characters' potential paths in the composition process much as the digital reader may follow them. Rather than narrowing my field of perspective vision into one version of the tale to be fixed in a linear order on paper, composing in digital media, with its "constantly afforded added views of the text through the window(s) of the interface" (Ciccoricco 2012, 259) — nodes — widened even the analogue novella into multiple narration.

The base instance of multiple narration appears as back-and-forth (Richardson 2006, 62) narrative switching between chapters. "Lost, Seeking Found", the first chapter, is narrated through a third-person perspective, limited entirely to Ben in a mimetic biography. The perspective switches to Amelia's first person blog/social media narrative in "Puerta Cerrada de Unman", also mimetic in its clear autobiographical content and form. "Awake the Mighty Dread" switches the perspective again, and it is here, in both the analogue and digital forms, that the narrative perspective becomes ambiguous.

As noted in the previous section, the analogue "Awake" is narrated in covert third-person (with occasional uses of second-person); the digital "Awake" IF takes the conventional second-person narration in both its replies and reports, but also incorporates a third-person narrator in the book of tales that Lilly finds on the train. Though the Trickster, as I will hereafter refer to him, is present as a character in both "Lost" and "Puerta", cajoling both Ben and Amelia to enter Færwhile, he makes his first narrator-appearance as the covert narrator in "Awake". Here, the Trickster takes the role of interlocutor, "an unstable and inherently protean figure...that regularly oscillates from one function or status to another as it evokes familiar categories like narrator and narratee in order to blur their edges or transgress them altogether" (Richardson 2006, 85). This interlocutor role in the analogue "Awake" as well as the second-person narration (layered, as previously discussed, with narrator, narratee, reader and storyteller) result in an ambiguous multiple narration in both versions of the text.

This effect becomes amplified as the tale progresses: the Trickster carries his narration forward in Amelia's chapter "Threading the 'While'", both overtly narrating the story from an oscillating first- and third-person perspective as interlocutor, and entering the diegesis of the chapter to converse with and persuade Amelia to direct the story to his whims, as seen in the following passage:

Ami is stretched out on a cloud when he finally reaches her. I trail behind, shaping myself into a skulking dog.

"Hello," she says.

"Hello," he replies.

**MAKE HIM GO AWAY, AMI.**

I send the message to her so he can't see it. (45)

The second interlocutor of the *Færwhile* tale enters in this chapter as well: a Storyteller who makes her appearance in extradiegetic asides as she and the Trickster bicker over how to shape and tell the stories. The narration now consists of the Trickster's overt narration of Amelia's tale, and the non-narrated extradiegetic exchanges between Trickster and Storyteller, an example of a morphing metaphor that adds a "multidimensional aspect in which a single entity fluctuates between two superimposed functions and identities, hence creating a perceptible blend of the two agents...sounding through the heteroglot and creating new semantic implications" (Bucholz 2009, 214-215). Toward the end of "Threading", Ben is urged to tell an embedded story in order to transport himself from Amelia's cybernetic storyworld to one that will bring him closer to Lilly; while the overt narrator does not shift entirely to Ben, this aspect still introduces Ben for the first time as a narrator within the overall text, adding an additional layer of narration. This layering is not only ambiguous, it is unnatural, as the narrators emerge as a cacophony of voices battling for control of the narrative; thus the text morphs into Richardson's anti-mimetic narrative, calling attention to the narrative structures of narration themselves, becoming unnatural.

This unnatural multiple narration continues in "Streams Slipping in the Dark": the Storyteller and Trickster continue their metafictional asides; the Trickster narrates sections of this story in both the analogue and digital versions (though in a more covert fashion); and the Storyteller emerges as a covert narrator of the sections involving Lilly. The Storyteller and Trickster's metafictional asides initially suggest they are engaged in a competitive storycrafting contest, each with their pet characters and themes: they have chosen "sides" of the island the characters are traversing, which is reflected in the

digital version as a flipping coin. The digital reader (arbitrarily) chooses a side to enter the story, and receives the sections of the story relevant to either the Trickster or the Storyteller; only on restarting the piece from the opposite side will the digital reader receive the entire story. By the end of the tale (both analogue and digital), the sides have become muddled — neither Trickster nor Storyteller remember which side of the story they chose, and in the final scene one of them enters the story as the Queen character. The text does not explicitly identify the Queen as either Trickster or Storyteller; its ambiguity suggests, as intended, that the Queen could represent either figure, and that the two figures are one and the same.

*Færwhile's* closing chapter, "Swallowing the Tale's Tail", switches narration once again, as Lilly narrates her story in first-person for the first time. The ambiguity in this chapter is replaced with an almost refreshing clarity of narrative voice. As Lilly's consciousness fades, however, she urges Ben, Amelia, and Hal to take up the story, to keep it alive through their own narration. The narrative perspective switches to a third-person covert narrator, mirroring that of "Lost" and "Awake" (analogue), while the dialogue sequences feature first Amelia, then Hal, and finally Ben picking up the narration of the story itself, much as Ben did in "Threading". In the digital version, this overt narrator is morphed entirely into each character's homodiegetic perspective in each section.

On the surface it seems that *Færwhile* has circled back onto its introductory narration, wiping away all the ambiguity and confusion of the unnatural narrative perspectives presented along the way. Richardson argues that these contradictory, permeable, and dis-framed narrators lead to "postmodern unreliability" (2006, 103). This particular project both upholds and denies that notion of unreliability. On the one hand, the chapters progress from straightforward mimetic narration, of the sort that readers typically accept as reliable, through a layered narration that incorporates ambiguous narration and metalepsis, and seems to be moving toward a centrifugal multiple narration wherein the text becomes an "...irreducible galaxy of different, heterogenous or antithetical perspectives" (Richardson 2006, 62). But while both "Streams" and "Tail" seem fragmented and permeable, with their multiple narrators and disparate voices, the thematic transgression of narrative power in these chapters reverses the progression, reducing the disparate voices to a centripetal multiple narration, "to a single narrating position at the end" (Richardson 2006, 62). The message here is that no story is entirely mimetic, no tale is strictly homodiegetic,



restricted to the existents and events that a single narrator (or implied author) cares to tell; every character (and by extrapolation, every person) has a voice in their own story. Lilly is both Trickster and Storyteller, weaving her story from all the different perspectives of the characters within it, but through them maintaining her own singular narration. In "Swallowing the Tale's Tail", when she fades away, she turns her story over to Ben and Amelia, who take it up and weave their own stories, which begin in Lilly's story. In this manner, *Færwhile* is both thesis and antithesis to Richardson's notion of postmodern unreliability through narrative perspective.

### **Transgressing Narrative Boundaries: Metalepsis**

The various layers of narrative perspective in *Færwhile* are strongly linked to the narrative levels present; as *Færwhile* was conceived as a story that would range across a reality-based storyworld, into various locales of a fantasy world, and again into aspects of dream, varying narrative levels in the diegesis alone was essential. Yet while this is not the first story I have written incorporating multiple levels of diegetic story,<sup>16</sup> it is the first to engage in ontological metalepsis, defined as "(1) vertical interactions either between the actual world and a storyworld or between nested storyworlds, or as (2) horizontal transmigrations between storyworlds" (Bell & Alber 2012, 166; cf. Genette 1980, Ryan 2006). Alice Bell & Jan Alber also note that very few print examples of metalepsis exist, calling for the need to examine narrative forms outside print in order to explore the practice (2012, 169). Metalepsis is often inherent in digital texts: Ryan specifically notes the necessary engagement with both the storyworld and the extradiegetic storyworld in interactive fictions and games (2006, 135) as well as mapping functions of hypertexts (144); Hayles explores the interplay of the diegetic poem and the hypodiegetic code of code poetry (2002).

Given this scarcity in print texts in general, and specifically in my own work, I suggest that the prominence of metalepsis in multimodal forms, and in this project in particular, is at least partially due to the multi-level nature of the composition process. Just as narratives are theorised to have narrative levels or layers — diegetic discourse, hypodiegetic embedded tales, hyperdiegetic metafiction, etc. — so too does the process of multimodal composition. The digital author in the activity of composition is

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<sup>16</sup> The most prominent example is an unpublished novel drafted between 2005-2007, in which the protagonist is drawn from her "real" world into a supernatural realm by a deranged spirit intent upon stealing her children. "A Queen for a King" (Skains 2008a) also traverses a "real" and a "fairy" world.

engaging with the diegetic text-produced-so-far (as displayed in a preview output) and various levels of the hypodiegetic text-produced-so-far (writing code, constructing images, recording audio, etc.). Dave Ciccoricco notes that this "architectonic space" (Kaplan & Moulthrop in Ciccoricco 2012) in which multimedia design and composition occurs is "paradoxically stable and dynamic... a rich palette for perspectives that entail elements of textual structure, formal design, and referential storyworld" (2012, 260). The digital author necessarily transgresses these composition levels in multimodal composition; as noted in Chapter 6, the cognitive processes engaged in the act of composition affects the composition itself — in this case, transgressing composition levels facilitates metalepsis in the ontological narrative.

Metalepsis in *Færwhile* arises out of this architectonic space initially in the form of descending metalepsis, wherein characters or narrators jump to a lower level of diegesis (the highest narrative level being the *actual*) into hypodiegetic stories (as defined by Bell & Alber 2012; cf. Ryan 2006). The boundaries between narrative levels in *Færwhile* are identifiable as: the diegetic level of Ben's Los Angeles, Amelia's Wales, and Lilly's foster family; the embedded hypodiegetic level of the many lands of Færwhile; and the hyperdiegetic level where the Storyteller and the Trickster craft and manipulate the characters and storyworlds. Ben and Amelia, respectively in "Lost" and "Puerta", descend from the diegetic level into the hypodiegetic Færwhile. Lilly alternates between descent into Færwhile, and ascent into the diegetic world, represented as her nightmares. Once entrenched in Færwhile, the characters move horizontally across the various storyworlds: Lilly and Hal depart Babbingen, Ben and Amelia depart Amelia's cyber-constructed world in "Threading", all to enter the island queendom in "Streams", subsequently traversing the geography of Færwhile by train to enter the final storyworld of "Swallowing the Tale's Tale". These are all examples of metalepsis at story level, as boundaries between stories are violated, leading to "confusion between distinct ontological levels" (Cohn & Gleich 2012, 106).

The text enters rhetorical metalepsis in the hyperdiegetic level, which "interrupts the representation of the current level through a voice that originates in or addresses a lower level, but without popping the top level from the stack" (Ryan 2006, 206), in the form of the metafictional dialogue between Trickster and the Storyteller that appear in both "Threading" and "Streams". These occasions do not violate the boundaries between narrative levels; when the Trickster/Storyteller descends into "Threading" and "Streams" as a character, however, conversing with Amelia or ruling as

Queen, the ontological levels "become entangled...causing two separate environments to blend" (Ryan 2006, 207). As the narrative progresses, the characters begin to engage in ascending metalepsis: Ben takes on the role of narrator at the end of "Threading" in order to control which horizontal storyworld he enters; Lilly ascends to narration to control her own demise, passing on her acquired power to Hal, Amelia, and Ben in "Swallowing the Tale's Tail". This ascendance to narrative perspective offers the closing metaphor for the story: the characters' (and by extension, the readers') control over the story increases as they assume a narrative voice, choosing to tell and direct their own discourse rather than following that of an unknown and fickle extradiegetic storyteller.

It is worth noting that these final examples of metalepsis are not ontological, as the characters are not transgressing the boundaries of the identified narrative levels. Rather, the challenge is on the level of narrative perspective: the characters wrest control of their story not by leaping across levels, but by seizing the role of narrator. In the opening chapters, the Trickster narrates the story, crafting it entirely, assuming an authorial role in both the narration and the descent into diegetic discourse to manipulate both Ben and Amelia into traveling to Færwhile. The progression into layered multiple narration demonstrates a fragmentation of control, which is lost to the characters entirely in the closing chapter. Thus the challenges to the structure of the discourse that most strongly communicate the underlying metaphor of the story arise primarily from disruption of the narrative perspective, and secondarily from ontological metalepsis.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary narratives, including modern and postmodern literature, film, and digital fiction, trend toward seeing existence as "fragmented — as multiple, discontinuous, discordant, and confusing" (Beja 1979, 76), toward creating, fragmenting, and reconstructing narrative voices (Richardson 2006, ix). Jenny Weight notes that technology affects the human experience, that the computer is a "performative device of unique capacity, sensitivity and complexity, which encourages a wide range of human creativity, interpretation and, indeed, collaboration" between the writer, the apparatus, and the reader (2006, 416). The conventions of various digital genres engage fundamentally in unnatural narration, including the conventional use of second-person perspective and necessary metalepsis in IFs and other ludic platforms.

Ciccoricco notes that "[i]n multimodal digital fictions, the domain of interface design can permeate that of the diegesis" (2012, 260); the cognitive processes of the digital, multimodal composition of *Færwhile* significantly affected the narrative structures of the creative artefacts. The hyperlink as a narrative device affords multiple reading paths to the reader; it also affords multiple writing paths to the writer, encouraging them to explore a multitude of characters and potential narrative strands in the planning and translation stages of composition. In this project, that multiplicity of cognitive engagement pushed the narration in the artefact beyond an ostensibly mimetic back-and-forth narration through ambiguity and into anti-mimetic, layered multiple narration that called attention to the structure and power of narrative perspective. The progression of the narrative through both centrifugal and centripetal narration calls attention to the unreliability of narrative voice, while firmly grounding the power of narrative in the perspective of whomever takes control, whether character or reader.

Similarly, the layering of architectonic spaces, and the requisite transgression called for in creating digital fictions that are built from layers of often simultaneously displayed and edited code, image, sound and text-as-displayed led to both ontological metalepsis and analogous challenges to power through narration. These challenges to the stability of the narrative levels and the authority of the narrator blend to offer a clear theme communicated through the very structure of the discourse: every person must seek to control their own story, rather than letting it fall to the arbitrary whims of an interlocutor.

Thus the practice of multimodal digital composition itself facilitates unnatural narratives, and to a certain degree naturalises their unconventional elements. Second person perspective is conventional for some forms of digital fiction, as is transgression across narrative levels. Potential narratives — formed through hyperlinks and polylinearity dictated by reader interactivity — are conventional for IFs and hyperfictions and games. The digital writer engaged in the cognitive processes of planning and translating the many possibilities of narrative into the multiplicity of composition levels is thus encouraged by the apparatus to transgress narrative boundaries and authority as well.

## Chapter 5

### Fluid Texts: Implicit collaboration in electronic narratives

Appropriation, the act of borrowing from another's creative work to create a new work, is an acknowledged practice of authority transgression in the arts, particularly the visual arts, where it contributes to continued discourse and response; as Stephen Voyce notes, "[t]he history of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century avant-garde is a history of plundering, transforming, excavating, cataloguing, splicing, and sharing the creative output of others" (2011, 408). In literature, appropriation is frequently a gray area between inspiration and plagiarism; electronic literature, however, with its frequent merging of the visual and literary arts (among others), lends itself more readily toward collaboration and appropriation. As I have found in my own work, and this chapter will show, appropriation alters both the writer's process and the final narrative, resulting in an implicit collaboration between writer/artist and those whose work is appropriated.

I use the term "implicit collaboration" here, as opposed to the more familiar "appropriation", for several reasons. Appropriation is a recognised practice in most media, perhaps most used in visual arts, but certainly utilised in film and literature (Barefoot 2011; Goldsmith 2011; Epstein 2012). Guy Barefoot refers to Joseph Cornell's appropriation of found footage as "recycling", which at the very least puts a positive spin on the process, that of making use of materials which would otherwise be thrown away. Ken Goldsmith echoes Foucault, Barthes, Genette, and Benjamin in asking "...isn't all cultural material shared, with new works built upon preexisting ones, whether acknowledged or not?...What is the difference between appropriation and collage?" (2011, 110), while espousing the benefits of "uncreative writing" in terms of artistic inspiration and discourse.

The term appropriation, however, along with other terms such as assemblage, remix, sample, and collage, fails to connote the authorship of the "sampled" artists whose work is incorporated. Other, more negative terms, such as plagiarism or Henry Jenkins's "textual poachers" (1992), have clear connotations of unethical, even illegal,

actions. Artists refer to their intertextual processes using various more innocuous terms: Mark Amerika's "surf-sample-manipulate", for example, is grounded in the actual activity of seeking material, appropriating elements of found art, and re-purposing it to create new art (1997, n.p.). Ken Goldsmith's 2011 description of what he terms "uncreative writing" is almost self-effacing, and in fact ironic given that he describes his process of using *only* found material in his writing as having "as many decisions, moral quandaries, linguistic preferences, and philosophical dilemmas as there are in an original or collaged work" (119). Clay Spinuzzi's "compound mediation" is nearly mechanical, describing a process of "bring[ing] together texts from multiple sources...in order to create new texts, a process often involving breakdown, reallocation of resources, creation of new hybrid genres, and shifts in power" (Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2007, 382) which removes the authors of these texts almost entirely.

My purpose in choosing the term "implicit collaboration" is to acknowledge both this active process of appropriation, but also the inspirational effects of collaborating with other artists, both within and without the genre in which I am actively working. The appropriated works (I should say "consciously appropriated", to differentiate them from Gérard Genette's cultural and literary palimpsests [1997]) have been placed in the commons for the express purposes of such appropriation. The use of Creative Commons or similar licensing denotes an attitude of sharing and co-creation, which "serves to broaden the consumption of [creative] commodities through space and time, cementing their position in popular culture" (Currah 2007, 468). As the majority of works with such licenses carry an "attribution" caveat (works can be used and re-distributed only if proper credit is given), it is clear that the creators want their contributions to be acknowledged, their authorship explicitly recognised. This "giving away" of resources (though in a digital environment, resources are duplicated, never transferred) in a digital gift economy results in increased capital in the form of status (Currah 2007; cf. Sinnreich, et al. 2009). Contributors who offer premium resources — whether it be useful advice in tech forums, open-source coding or mods, or high-quality digital art — are raised to a higher status within the community, and are thus more likely to receive valuable resources in return.

In terms of using resources to create digital fiction, these collaborations are generally not as explicit as a demarcation of co-authorship would denote. As I explore in this chapter, the creation of these "compound mediations" involves surfing for materials, sampling elements that inform or inspire my work, and manipulating them

for incorporation into a new piece. It could be argued that this is no more a collaborative process than that of workers on an assembly line: workers farther down the line may have to adjust their activities according to deviations committed by previous workers, but overall the process is not an equally partnered activity. As I will show, however, found art and subsequent appropriation of that art in a new work have the potential for profound influence. The inclusion of found art and that inclusion's effect upon the creative process combine in a collaboration between artists, made implicit because the original artists have no explicit authorship role in the creation of the new piece.

This chapter will examine two of the *Færwhile* texts, "Awake the Mighty Dread" and "Streams Slipping in the Dark", presenting an insight into their composition through the use of implicit collaboration with other artists, as well as analysis of the narrative effects of these "found" resources on the final artefacts.

### **Process and Narrative Effects**

As discussed at length in Chapter 2, the Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition offers a framework for examining the process and narrative effects of implicit collaboration. This model acknowledges the fluid (and yes, chaotic) mental processes of writing, as it accounts for the author/creator's shifts in, out, and through planning, writing, and rewriting phases at any given point in the process. In addition, the Practitioner Model factors in the influences of working in multiple modes, feedback from the fictional world being created, as well as interruptions to the work or inspiration from outside sources.

For the purposes of this chapter, I am primarily interested in Intrusions of the Actual, as they occur in the gap between Planning and Translation. This gap is where implicit collaboration has a role, as it is where "surfing" for materials enters the process. During the planning process, I envision the text; this generally involves drafting analogue versions of the text, storyboarding, and concept mapping, though not necessarily all of these stages occur for every project. For multimodal projects, another box could be added in this white space: seeking resources (Amerika's "sampling"). As the following sections on use of images and use of source code explore, explicitly exposing myself to and actively seeking others' art to appropriate during this point in the process has a direct effect on the translation of the project at hand.

### *Use of Found Images in Hyperfiction*

"Streams Slipping in the Dark" is a hyperfiction created through the use of HTML and Javascript. The story follows Ben, Lilly, and Amelia as they make their separate ways through a fairyland in search of one another, converging upon a castle and its resident queen. The piece was first drafted in analogue form, with the digital hyperfiction in planning stages as the print text was composed. Planning for the hyperfiction consisted primarily of hand-drawn storyboards and concept mapping of the navigation. Once the storyboards and navigational maps were complete, I began the search through Creative Commons sources (flickr.com, deviantart.com, Google Image search) to find images and audio files to sample, manipulate, and appropriate.

The working plan at this stage was to build the hyperfiction around the visual concept of a Tolkienesque fantasy map of the island queendom the characters were exploring.<sup>17</sup> I made extensive use of stock materials on deviantart.com for parchment-like background textures and Photoshop brush sets of map icons (mountains, villages, trees, etc.). I intended to assemble these pieces together into a final image of my own creation for a clickable, interactive map that would deliver nodes of the story as the reader explored, following the actions of the characters within the story.

I am not a visual artist by the stretch of anyone's imagination; even armed with the ingredients for a fantasy-style map, I still needed some visual samples of finished maps to guide me. In my quest for more experienced artists' creations on deviantart.com, I discovered Anna Rose's 2011 ink-and-watercolor "childhood dreamspace map"<sup>18</sup> (Figure 5.1). The image itself is not shared in the commons,<sup>19</sup> but its whimsy, colour, and depth were eye-catching and intriguing, lending the image toward narrative rather than mere illustration; the colours and textures overcame the barrier of the screen to create "a stage on which fairy tales spring to life" (Benjamin 1996[1926], 435). The artist's description furthers this perception: "for class i had to draw a map of any events that happened during my childhood. this is where i

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17 See <http://amegusa.deviantart.com/art/Bilbo-s-Map-of-Eriador-80863819> for an example.

18 Anna Rose's deviantart.com username is "anna-terrible". See <http://anna-terrible.deviantart.com/art/childhood-dreamspace-map-207434534>.

19 deviantart.com (at this time) does not offer a search filter for work with Creative Commons licensing, and thus searches result in a mix of works that are and are not available for appropriation. At times, this can be frustrating, as I generally find that the highest quality work - i.e., that which I'd be most inclined to use - carries full copyright protections. Often these form part of professional artists' sample portfolios. On the other hand, the inability to filter out this protected, professional-level work can, as in this case, lead to inspiration rather than full appropriation.



remember dreaming as a kid [sic]" (Rose 2011, n.p.). The inspiration for "childhood dreamspace map" seated itself well in the narrative of "Streams Slipping in the Dark", which centres on Lilly, a young girl who is, arguably, dreaming the entire landscape(s) in which the story takes place.



Figure 5.1. Anna Rose's 2011 "childhood dreamspace map". Used with permission.

Finding this image first resulted in elation, as it seemed to be an image I would have created for this piece had I sufficient ability in the visual arts, followed swiftly by extreme disappointment that it was not licensed for commons use. I repeatedly returned to the image, though, of course, it did not fit perfectly into the story. "Streams" was centred on a castle, and contained neither a haunted house nor a marketplace, which are the defining features of "childhood dreamspace map." Eventually, I settled upon a plan: to attempt as best as my limited skills at desktop illustration would permit to emulate the outline, depth, and feel of Rose's dreamspace, while manipulating the image to fit more seamlessly into the narrative I had created. The result clearly shows the origins of the image as belonging to Rose, but sufficient changes wrought to bind it within the storyworld of "Streams Slipping in the Dark" (see Figure 5.2).

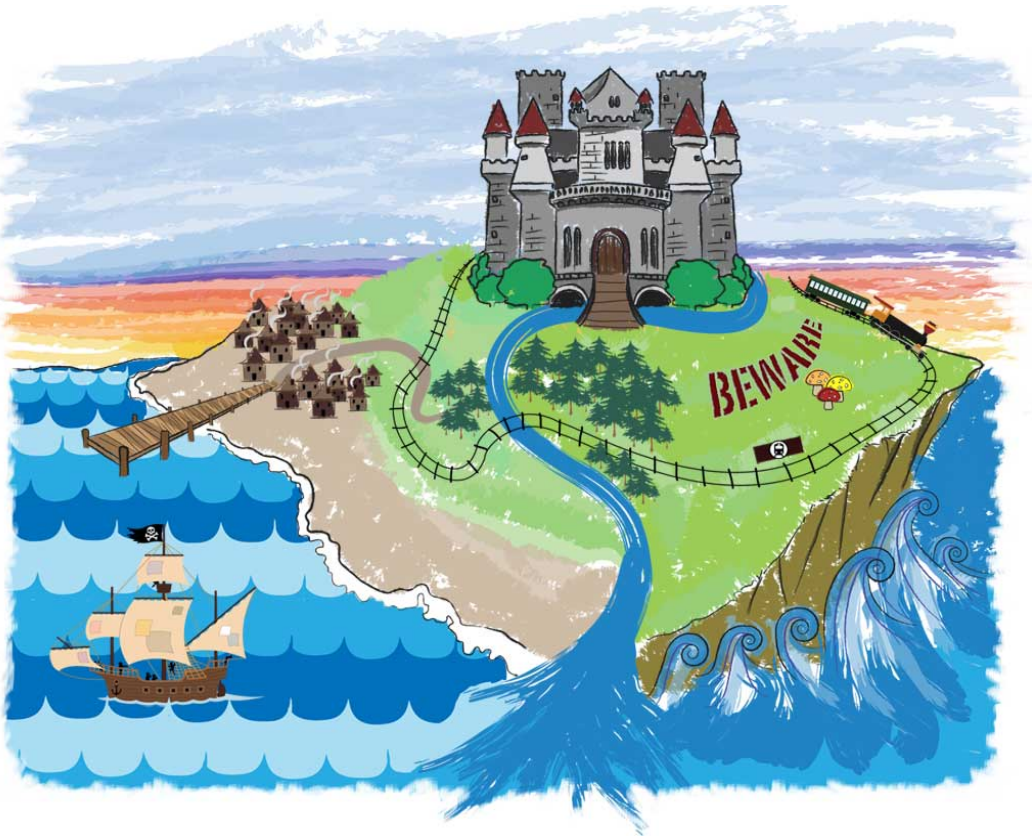


Figure 5.2. Interactive Image from "Streams Slipping in the Dark".

In the end, the translation of this hyperfiction was a much more ground-up creative activity than I had planned for. After all, my initial work was largely a process of assemblage: using other artists' Photoshop brush packs and textures to piece together a useable fantasy map. Inspired by Rose's dreamscape, however, I embarked upon a piecemeal illustration journey that resulted in appropriation (the basic outline of the island, the pirate ship, the train, and a line drawing of the castle all came from other artists), assemblage (putting all the pieces together, manipulating them to work together in the same image), and original creation (the village, the forest, the water, the coloration).

Anna Rose's dreamscape also affected the narrative and the reader's experience. Had my original plan stuck, the resulting image would have carried connotations of Tolkien-variety fantasy, familiar and even clichéd. It would have incorporated iconic imagery (representations of mountain ranges, forests, cities, etc.) in a largely muted colour palette (that of parchment-and-ink), with a two-dimensional aspect. The final image that I created (Figure 5.2) instead carries a more whimsical, child-like tone, calling to mind pop-up storybooks in its depth and colour, immersing the reader in the

fairy tale world through Benjamin's "primal phenomenon" of colour (1926, 442). It carries forth the fairy-tale aspect of the narrative through to the imagery, and illustrates (though not explicitly) a possible truth underlying the narrative itself: that the world is created in the dreaming mind of a child. The effects of illustration and depth, instead of flat, representative map-space, invite the reader to explore the map. They offer a space in which the reader can travel him/herself, rather than merely following a dotted line of the characters' travels. The further the reader moves into the image, the more narrative they discover, moving with the characters rather than observing from a distance.

The implicit collaboration with Rose in this piece resulted in better integration of the modes used within the text than what I had designed in my original model. In the next section, I will explore a more (insidious?) form of implicit collaboration: code-borrowing.

### *Use of Open-source Code in Interactive Fiction*

The philosophy of open-source code sharing that I will use in this chapter is largely attributed (by Lessig 2008; Voyce 2011) to Richard Stallman's contributions to the GNU project and his group's "free software definition" (gnu.org, n.d.), though they are careful to differentiate between "free" and "open source". The driving motivation behind an open or free sharing of software code for noncommercial purposes is to encourage innovation and collaboration (Voyce 2011). The benefit to artists participating in this open network of dissemination is a "proliferation of potential texts amid continuously changing assemblages of authorial, intertextual, and communal networks" (Voyce 2011, 409).

Many digital writers and poets are not code writers when they begin working in digital media. While I had done some rudimentary HTML coding in the '90s, and had picked up a little basic programming here and there in school, I was not proficient in any programming language when I began creating digital fiction. At this stage, I conducted most of my programming work through the "cut-n-paste" method: determining what function I needed, searching for the code online, cutting and pasting it into my own work, and adjusting from there. I am not alone in this practice, as evidenced by the bounty of Javascript code repositories online.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A Google search for "javascript library" (a collection of previously written/published code) returns 526,000,000 results. Commonly used resources include jQuery (<http://jquery.com>) and "suites" of libraries such as those offered by W3Schools (<http://www.w3schools.com>).

The first code-based writing that I attempted was prompted by a university module I audited in writing games, using the Inform7 platform for interactive fiction (IF). Inform7's source code is a friendly language to learn for newcomers, as it is actually structured to mimic the English language as much as possible. For instance, the line "A chest is an unopened, openable container in the dungeon." defines an object (the chest), its properties (it is a container that is currently closed, but capable of being opened), and its particular location (the room labeled "dungeon"). In addition to the (initially) straightforward structure of the source code, Inform7 has a small but enthusiastic community online, and many who work with the program write and share extensions to the program as well as the source code for their own IFs.

In crafting my first IF, I made use of many of these extensions; I also relied heavily upon Aaron Reed's 2011 *Creating Interactive Fiction with Inform7*. Reed frequently uses examples from his 2010 IF *Sand-dancer*, and offers links to downloadable source files from that work. Rather fortuitously for my own work, Reed's *Sand-dancer* incorporated a trickster figure, as mine did, and revolved around similar recurring themes of dream and memory. It seemed a custom-made guide for crafting my tale of wandering, wondering, trickery, and dreamworld.

The most prominent of the borrowed elements from Reed's IF were those defining memories, and actions concerning memories. In *Sand-dancer*, memories are things in a container labeled "subconscious". They are triggered by the player-character (PC) handling particular objects within the world of the story, labeled "charged objects". The first few lines of Reed's code defining memories are as follows:

A memory is a kind of thing. A memory can be retrieved or buried. A memory is usually buried.

Suggestion relates various things to one memory (called the suggested memory).

The verb to suggest (he suggests, they suggest, he suggested, it is suggested, he is suggesting) implies the suggestion relation.

Understand "memory/memories" as a memory.

Does the player mean doing something to a memory: it is unlikely.

The subconscious is a container. When play begins: now every memory is in the subconscious.

Definition: a thing is charged if it suggests a memory which is in the subconscious.

In my IF, "Awake the Mighty Dread", I used this example to generate a set of dreams that the PC falls into when they touch charged objects or enter the command "sleep" (differences from Reed's code are coloured red and underlined):

A dream is a kind of thing. A dream can be dreamed, or undreamed. A dream is usually undreamed.

Trigger relates various things to one dream (called the triggered dream).

The verb to trigger (he triggers, they trigger, he triggered, it is triggered, he is triggering) implies the trigger relation.

Understand "dream/dreams" as a dream.

Instead of examining a dream when player is awake: say "Dreams only become real when you're asleep."

Does the player mean doing something to a dream: it is unlikely.

The subconscious is a container. When play begins: now every dream is in the subconscious.

Definition: a thing is charged if it triggers a dream which is in the subconscious.

Clearly, the code is copied and pasted from Reed's source code, with some (but not all) labels changed to suit the new story: "memories" become "dreams"; "suggest" becomes "trigger". The code shifts significantly after this sequence, as the action of dreaming required further parameters related to sleeping and waking that were not required for *Sand-dancer's* use of memories.

Use of Reed's code did not introduce dreams to the overall narrative, as dream sequences are clearly present in early analogue drafts of "Awake", though they are triggered not by charged objects or conscious efforts to sleep but by extreme emotional stress. The effect of the code-borrowing in the IF is significant, however, as it did result in a shift in the action of the IF narrative through the addition of charged objects. The PC must make their way through a large palace full of objects — some charged, some not — in order to reach the conclusion. Falling into dreams offers crucial insight into the story, why it is happening, and what the PC has to overcome; falling into dreams and not being able to escape them leads to a bad end for the PC (death or inability to continue with the story). These charged objects triggering these dreams over and over are not present in early drafts of the story, as the analogue story follows the path I as the author dictated. Their appropriation from Reed's IF allows for "Awake"'s expansion

into Montfort's "potential narratives", brought about by the exploration of space and objects that is intrinsic to interactive fiction (2003, 14).

It is also important to note that I completed one analogue draft of the story before beginning to write the IF source code; Reed's code served to add functionality and depth to an already-developed narrative and storyworld. Had I begun with his code as inspiration for a new IF of my own, perhaps the work that resulted would have been more derivative than collaborative. As I was working from an established narrative, however, Reed's appropriated source code expanded my work in ways that, given my novice capability with the code, I could not have anticipated or built without its incorporation. While quite often the cut-n-paste technique leads to changes in the narrative because of limitations (e.g., code for the desired functionality has not been previously written or made available), here it enhanced and pushed "Awake" into narrative possibilities made available only through the implicit collaboration of the more experienced code writer.

### **Implications for Authorship**

Implicit collaboration occurs in overlapping spaces of Internet gift economies: exhibition space and collaborative space. Andrew Currah identifies the first as a space for user-generated content on display (YouTube, Flickr), and the second as group production projects such as Wikipedia and SourceForge (2007, 478). By sampling works offered in exhibition spaces, recombining them and offering them up to further derivatives, a creative, collaborative gift economy is created. With it, questions and concerns arise with regard to attribution, copyright, monetization, and the increasingly nebulous notion of authorship.

The ethics of appropriating other artists' work is, and likely always will be, contested (Goldsmith 2011; Sinnreich, et al. 2009). Copyright laws were introduced in part to reduce exploitation from appropriation, and to provide a stable balance between excessive control of content that under-utilises creative works, and free sharing that results in under-production (Currah 2007, 468). These laws have endured numerous revisions since their inception in attempts to maintain this balance, and digital technologies have set the balance swinging yet again, as evidenced in the "push-pull" of anti-theft software designed to protect content, and that software explicitly designed to remove such protections (Cover 2006, 153).

The currently prominent solution, for some, is to offer creative work in the commons under licenses offered by Creative Commons ([creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org)). While these works are of great benefit to artists and writers like me, Currah (2007) notes that creation of this open, gift economy can result in several downsides: copyright theft, floods of poor-quality works, malicious attacks, and asymmetric participation in the ability to do more taking than giving. Creative Commons licenses offer mitigation for some of these, as creators can place caveats on the use of their work to account for them, such as attribution to ensure credit and "share-alike" to ensure new works are fed back into the commons. This system rides the fence between a completely free and open gift economy, and one in which authorship (and its implications of ownership and commodification) is explicitly codified.

The need for such a system arises from a creative culture dependent on implicit collaboration, "texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation with no clear point of origin" (Stam in Barefoot 2011, 166). A text with no clear point of origin ostensibly has no clear point of authorship. If this is true for adaptations and transmedia texts, it is certainly true for digital texts, which Rob Cover notes "[blur] the line between author and audience, and erod[e] older technological, policy and conventional models for the 'control' of the text, its narrative sequencing and its distribution" (Cover 2006, 140).

Losing the distinction between author and reader can be viewed quite negatively. German author Helene Hegemann's 2012 novel *Axolotl Roadkill* garnered her widespread criticism for what some called plagiarism and she called remixing (Connolly 2012, n.p.). Kenneth Goldsmith recalls that some poets reacted negatively to their work being appropriated to the *Issue 1* poetry anthology, labelling it as copyright theft, misattribution, and even vandalism (2011, 121-2). Aram Sinnreich, et al.'s 2009 survey showed that audience attitudes toward appropriation depended upon the perception of commercialism and originality in the piece: if work was appropriated for profit, or if the appropriated work was seen as copying rather than contributing something original, it was more likely to be seen as unethical.

Many, however, view creative works — even their own — as part of the cultural commons. Goldsmith sees "uncreative writing" as a valuable asset to creative writers, enabling inspiration and continued discourse through intertextuality. Younger respondents in Sinnreich, et al.'s survey "tended to be more aware of configurable technologies and practices, more likely to engage in them, and — most interestingly —

more likely to accept the legitimacy of these expressive forms, by viewing remixes and mash-ups as 'original'" (2009, 1249). The inception, growth, and continued use of sharing networks such as Stallman's GNU and the Creative Commons demonstrates that notions of collaboration and shared work are prominent in digital creative environments.

This collaboration and shared work — even if it is asymmetrical — increases the sense of ownership and investment in a text for those who contribute. From fan fiction writers (Thomas 2007) to crowd-sourced workers (Kittur 2010), "many people enter the grey area of configurability as consumers, and...gradually expand the locus of their agency and expertise" as producers, creators, and authors (Sinnreich, et al. 2009, 1249). As this work continues to be cycled through the commons, sampled, manipulated and recycled, it inspires imitation, yes, but also further innovation and creativity.

## **Conclusion**

This cycle of creativity depends on the activity of implicit collaboration. Appropriation is intrinsic in much of the creative activity in the current Internet gift economy; exploring the effects arising from sampled work can expand our understanding of the creative process. The concept of implicit collaboration, like the "attribution" tag offered by Creative Commons licensing, acknowledges the authorial contributions of the sampled artists, as well as the communal nature of artistic exchange. More than discourse, works engaging in this process arise from the specific talents and visions of those whose sampled works inspire, inform, and shape the active work. Where once the lines between author, text, and reader could be drawn with linear vectors, digital technology and their increasing availability and accessibility bring author, text, and reader into a potentially endless cycle of narrative creation, wherein the roles are fluid and the text may never be final. With the emergence of Creative Commons licensing, particularly the licensing of derivatives, art can no longer be considered "fixed", no longer capable of canonisation as the literary world has come to define it — possibly no longer attributable to a defined creator or author.



## Chapter 6

### **It's What You Know: The effects of developing multimodal knowledge on creative composition**

Digital fiction creator Andy Campbell's transition from print writer to digital writer coincided with the advent of the home computer and subsequent software capabilities (2011). In a 2011 presentation, he described his frustration with the paradigm of print publishing, his alternative distribution of stories through floppy discs, and his experiments with early graphic software and eventually the Adobe Flash platform and other emerging contemporary digital tools. His writing process and his knowledge of digital systems co-evolved, and as such his current creative process is grounded in the digital, to the point that he begins each piece not with an outline or a character, but generally with an image and a software platform.

In contrast, I began this project with a minimal foundation in the digital. I was experienced in writing short stories and novels ("analogue" texts), with practices grounded in the written mode of communication. Digital fiction, by definition, is multimodal, capable of incorporating the written word, images (both still and moving), audio, and elements of interactivity between the text and the reader (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Bell, et al. 2010). Not every writer who is intrigued by the narrative possibilities of digital media has the explicit knowledge of digital platforms, programs, and affordances necessary to compose digital texts. While most writers have a tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) of written narrative developed through the reading and writing elements of formal education and their reading and writing practices, they must develop explicit knowledge of their new media and internalise this explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge,<sup>21</sup> in order to fully realise the narrative possibilities inherent in multimodal forms. In this chapter, I use the Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition outlined in Chapter 2 to analyse how development of this explicit knowledge alters and evolves elements of the creative composition process as it is internalised.

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21 Ikujiro Nonaka & Hirotaka Takeuchi define explicit knowledge as that which is easily codified and transmitted, and tacit knowledge as "personal knowledge embedded in individual experience and involves intangible factors such as personal belief, perspective, and the value system" (1995, viii). They define the process of internalisation as translating explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge.

This chapter is primarily concerned with how changes in the writer's knowledge affect the foundational aspects of the composition of texts for digital media: understanding the rhetorical problem; responding to the rhetorical problem with relevant information, organisation, and interpretation; and translating that knowledge into the actualised text. The rhetorical problem of this project's creative texts is to convey a narrative that can communicate with readers in a multimodal medium. Inherent in that rhetorical problem are the questions of character, plot, setting, tone, language, and structure that inform any attempt to write a fictional story. Adding multimodality into the mix, however, adds difficulty in "trying to articulate how the transduction works, recognising the variety of individual and social and cultural factors that contribute to its working as it does" (Fortune 2005, 53).

Ron Fortune also notes that the few instructional texts that exist on multimodal creativity are largely concerned with how to use verbal and visual modes to illustrate or explain one another, rather than on developing Kress's mental "process of synaesthesia" (1998, in Fortune 2005, 53) in texts engaging multiple semiotic modes. In the absence of such pedagogical resources, digital writers must develop this synaesthesia individually, through reading and writing digital fiction as an exploratory action, in order to better engage with the rhetorical problem inherent in such multimodal texts. Multimodal composition, as the opening paragraph of this chapter described Andy Campbell's process, engages more naturally and fluidly with the planning process of composition, according to Linda Flower & John Hayes's 1984 Multiple Representation Theory (which posits that the initial mental model of a text is multimodal, then subsequently translated to written language). This process also deepens the "intertextual landscape of the composing space" (Ranker 2008, 229).

This intertextual landscape is an area of interest to this chapter. As that landscape shifted over the three years of these composition activities, my explicit knowledge of digital fiction changed and began to internalise; its changes became apparent in the creative work. "Our reading and writing are in dialogue with each other as we write in direct and indirect response to what we have read before, and we read in relation to the ideas we have articulated in our own writing" (Bazerman 2004, 53). Specifically, my growing knowledge and familiarity with digital fiction led to increased instances of Gérard Genette's hypertextuality (playing the texts off familiarity with other texts in the genre) and architextuality (exploring generic expectations in relation to other similar texts) (Genette 1997, 2-5; cf. Bazerman 2004, 58), as well as the

intratextuality formed by references to elements of my own text (Bazerman 2004, 62).

Deborah Brandt also notes that "...writing — like any other language act — is a profoundly social enterprise, and...what a writer does during composing is best understood in relationship to the social event that he or she is in the process of accomplishing" (1989, 152). This chapter examines the composition of the first drafts of the analogue novella, composed during the "social event" of my introduction to digital fiction. The creative pieces presented here were composed over the course of the first three years of this project, from the point of minimal awareness of the digital fiction genre, to a point of development that permitted me to create the accompanying digital texts in several different platforms. The first creative piece presented, "Last Stop Bar & Grill", illustrates the zero state: this story was written prior to developing knowledge of and engaging in the intertextual landscape of digital fiction, and shows my writing process in monomodal (written) composition. The second, "FuturePics LoveSounds" (Appendix A), illustrates the effects of my developing tacit knowledge on choice of narrative perspective and structure. The third, "Puerta Cerrada de Unman", shows the influence of medium in the composition process itself. The final section uses several texts ("Awake the Mighty Dread", "Threading the 'While'", "Streams Slipping in the Dark", and "Swallowing the Tale's Tail") to explore effects on the generative processes of building narrative structure and storyworld, as the narrative began to take on more interactive aspects.

Creative projects rarely work themselves out in a predictable, methodological fashion. Frank Smith notes that writers have "specifications" formed by our intentions for the writing, much as an architect is presented with specifications for a building s/he must design (1982). There will be more than one design possible for given specifications, and the details work themselves out through the design/writing (113-115), a process eloquently encapsulated by Flower & Hayes's 1981 Cognitive Process Model, which serves as the foundation for the Practitioner Model used in this thesis. Peter M. Senge, et al., describe the distance between personal vision or intention and the current reality as "creative tension", which can only be resolved through strategic and/or exploratory attempts to decrease that distance (1994, 195). We set out to explore a question of creativity, and the experiment is one of discovery and serendipity (Makri & Blandford 2012a, b), rather than one of specifically proving or disproving a set of circumstances. The results, therefore, are largely unpredictable.

The originally designed method for this project was to write a series of

complete print short stories with the intent of remediating (Bolter & Grusin 1999, 44-5) their final drafts into digital form. As I wrote the stories, however, becoming immersed in digital media, technologies, software, and the digital fiction community, my writing process began to evolve according to the intent for the story and how it was informed by my non-story-related activities. What emerged was a continuum of practice, ranging from my typical, established creative practice to a completely and necessarily hybrid and truly multimodal creative practice, depending on the stories; I discovered that stories intended for remediation into other media at their inception are fundamentally altered in their creation by this intent, in terms of character, structure, narrative, and process.

In his 2009 exploration of the interaction of writing and ideas, Mark A. Runco notes that:

[w]riting is best described as a process rather than a product, and it may be that very process that benefits the writer. The benefit may result from the self-discovery allowed by writing or the fact that writers must consider different options, find words, and think of various perspectives while writing (188).

The following sections analyse the results of these discoveries, primarily focusing on the effects of composing multimodal and multimedia stories on the writer's process itself, and analysing the texts for evidence of the internalisation of this knowledge from explicit to tacit.

### **"Last Stop Bar & Grill": The Prose Composition Process**

The short story "Last Stop Bar & Grill" (Skains 2010) was completed in December 2008, very early in the project research (which began in late September 2008), not intended to be part of this thesis, and indeed not included. Several other of my published short stories could have been used here as an example, as the process (described in this section) is quite well-established. This story was selected as it is the most recent of my prose fiction, and thus both freshest in my memory and composed in the same personal context (location, socio-economic environment, etc.) as the other creative pieces examined in this chapter, thus limiting the possible confounds. This section uses "Last Stop" as an illustrative example of my composition process prior to developing theoretical, contextual, and practical explicit knowledge of digital fiction.

### *Pre-writing*

The typical rhetorical problem for my short fiction is to explore a specific character dilemma in a storyworld that enhances and supports that dilemma. Engaging the long-term memory (Flower & Hayes 1981), or knowledge base (both explicit and tacit), begins with character: observations and awareness of how people interact with one another, how people with a defined set of characteristics react to certain situations, and how people display emotions and inner thoughts. World-building is also largely derived from this knowledge base, as my stories are generally set in environments with which I am intimately familiar (i.e., places in which I have lived), among cultures I have experienced or have researched.

### *Planning*

Idea generation for "Last Stop" emerged from the combination of these two elements of long-term memory (character and setting). A curiosity about the people who maintain road-side memorials led to the idea of Nell's character: a woman so arrested by the event represented by such a memorial that she could neither physically nor emotionally move away from it. The rest of the world-building was completed by a scene I had recently cut from a novel-in-progress, in which several mythological figures engage in a heated discussion in a Route 66 diner.

The initial goals set for "Last Stop", reflecting my typical pre-writing goals for short stories, were to begin with the given character in the given situation, then to add a catalyst that makes the current situation untenable, which creates the fundamental dilemma of the story. For short stories, these dilemmas are based on the main character's fundamental conflict; in "Last Stop", Nell's fundamental conflict is that she cannot move past grieving over her daughter and so cannot move on, either physically or emotionally, from the location of her daughter's death. The catalyst, or inciting incident, comes in the form of a would-be bandit who intends to rob the diner. All of these basic elements coalesce from the pre-writing stages as preinventive structures (Finke 1996; Ward, Smith & Finke 1999), with the initial goals no more defined than to discover through the process of writing where they will lead; they also form the extent of organisation for short pieces.

### *Writing*

Once the writing, or translating (Flower & Hayes 1981) has begun, I write as a swooper: "Swoopers write a story quickly, higgledy-piggledy, crinkum-crankum, any which way. Then they go over it again painstakingly, fixing everything that is just plain awful or doesn't work" (Vonnegut 1997, 137). Goal-setting is in constant evolution during the translating process: the act of writing is not only a translation process for swoopers; it is also engagement in idea generation and exploration, and preinventive structures are generated and explored through interaction with the text-produced-so-far (Finke 1996; Ward, Smith, & Finke 1999). It is worth noting that, as described in Flower & Hayes's 1984 Multiple Representation Thesis, the act of translating this story was arguably a transcription or remediation process: "Last Stop" unfolded in my imagination on a visual reel, which then needed translating into written language. Through translation of multimodal preinventive structures and interaction with the text-produced-so-far, the textual landscape both becomes more defined and offers more avenues than previously imagined.

### *Reviewing*

Redrafting begins with a cooling off period, allowing the story to sit for at least a week, but preferably two weeks or more; "Last Stop" rested for ten weeks between the first and second drafts. This allows me to evaluate and revise the piece from a more distanced perspective, as a critic and editor. The reviewing process takes on a cyclical structure: A) the story is evaluated in terms of how well it is addressing the established rhetorical situation; B) goals are refined according to that analysis; C) the story is revised according to these re-defined goals. The cycle repeats until the story meets the goals. Most stories go through about four drafts; "Last Stop" did not, as the second draft seemed to meet the rhetorical situation and my defined goals quite well, and was accepted for publication.

While I was certainly developing explicit knowledge of digital fiction by August of 2010, when "Last Stop" underwent its final revision, I did not consider remediating this work into digital form. At most, with its linear structure, consisting of one continuous scene, its use of third person limited perspective, and its focus on imagery and dialogue, "Last Stop" could arguably be remediated into film. The piece has no natural breaks for lexias, and the action is bound in a series of causes and effects,

which would be lost with a hyperlinked or rhizomatic structure. Nell as the main character avoids introspection and connections at all costs; she does not lend herself to the sort of intimacy via the first- or second-person perspective that digital fictions frequently utilise. A digital remediation would be largely cinematic, image-based and linear, and thus would not make use of the unique aspects of digital media (discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3).

This composition process, exemplified by "Last Stop Bar & Grill", formed my initial mental model of storytelling at the beginning of this project. As Senge, et al. discuss, however, mental models evolve through reflection and inquiry (such as my research into digital fiction), as new additions to short-term memory gradually change the long-term memory (1994, 237), and explicit knowledge is internalised. Considering additional avenues for story, however, in the form of multiple media, multiple modes, and structures released from the conformity and linearity (as I had perceived them to be) of prose introduced new narrative possibilities and tools that were slowly assimilated into my long-term memory. The following section analyses the process of writing several different stories/chapters, each demonstrating various effects of my growing explicit knowledge — and internalisation thereof — of digital fiction from theoretical, contextual, and practical perspectives.

### **"FuturePics LoveSounds": Shift in Perspective**

"FuturePics LoveSounds" (Appendix A),<sup>22</sup> written from August-October 2009, is a short story grounded in the same rhetorical situation and following a similar composition process as "Last Stop Bar & Grill". The story was written during a break in research, to relieve me from the extreme focus on one creative project. My research into digital fiction at this point had begun in earnest, primarily focused in literature reviews, readings in digital fiction, and exploration of software systems. I was immersed in exploration of the theory and practice of digital fiction, but had not yet composed a multimodal text; "FuturePics" demonstrates the first evidence of the internalisation of explicit knowledge about digital fiction.

"FuturePics" began with a situational dilemma: a character receives photographs of themselves in the future. Unlike "Last Stop", I barely considered

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<sup>22</sup> "FuturePics LoveSounds" was not included as a story in the creative portion of this project because its characters and narrative arc did not play into the novella narrative presented here, though it may eventually be incorporated into the overall storyworld of Færwhile.

character before I sat down to write. In the completed story, the main character receives several photographs depicting himself in London (apparently, in the future), first with an unknown woman, then lying beaten — and possibly dead — in a gutter. The story unfolds as the character attempts to both find out who sent the pictures, and to avoid the future apparently awaiting him.

In the planning process, the preinventive structures for the inciting incident were hard copy photographs: a character picks up photos from a 1-hour developer, and finds several that s/he never took, and that can only take place in the future. The photographs and their method of delivery demonstrate one effect of my developing tacit knowledge: between idea generating in the planning process to the translation process, the photographs shifted from hard copy 4x6s in a Kodak envelope to a shared digital photo album on FaceBook.

The most significant writerly choice in "FuturePics", however, came as the translation process began: with the line "Your friend Syd has a FaceBook strategy..." (Appendix A, 220), the choice of second-person perspective was set. Other than creative exercises, this was the first story in which I had used the second-person perspective; my published stories are told primarily from third-person perspective, with one in first-person perspective. (For further analysis of the effects of multimodal composition on narrative perspective, see Chapter 4.) Astrid Ensslin & Alice Bell (2012) note that the "[t]extual *you* features widely across digital, interactive texts, which allow *you* to bring about a species of ontological violation that is not possible in printed texts" (5, emphasis original). My reading of digital texts, including exploration of online games, such as the ludic fiction Ensslin & Bell present as a case study (*The Princess Murderer* [geniwate & Larsen 2003]) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG), among others, introduced me to narratives in which the reader has a contributing role. This knowledge of reader agency, consisting primarily as a tacit awareness of the perspectives and interactivity made possible by digital interfaces, led to an exploration of these narrative variables in prose, the medium with which I was still most comfortable working.

In addition to this intertextual (Genette 1997) effect of my research upon writerly choices in the composition of prose, "FuturePics" demonstrates intratextual effects as well. During the period in which "FuturePics" was composed, I was concurrently generating ideas and researching background materials for the creative element of this project. *Færwhile*'s foundation is laid in parallel mythologies,



particularly in the Trickster figure that occurs in many cultures (Bierlein 1994; Hyde 1998). *Færwhile*'s preinventive structures consisted of several interlinked stories taking place in various cultures and locations around the world, structurally pulled together primarily by this trickster element of parallel mythology. My research into mythology had introduced me to a Russian myth wherein a villager captures Death so that no one would ever die again, only to find that starvation and overpopulation were far worse than the natural order of life and death; when the villager finally releases Death, Death punishes him by resolving to never come for him, condemning the villager to eternal life (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 134). This immortal villager is the foundation of the Trickster figures across all the stories of *Færwhile*, as he meddles in the narratives and thus the lives of the characters, much as he attempted to meddle in the cycle of life and death in the Russian myth. Though "FuturePics" was not intended to be included in *Færwhile*, this immortal trickster appeared in the story anyway, as the "futographer" sending the mysterious photos to the protagonist.

The choice of perspective, the opportunity for reader agency in the story, and the intratextual narrative elements in "FuturePics" give it candidacy as a story in the world of *Færwhile*. Though the story was written to completion without the intent to remediate it, its use of social media references, second-person perspective, and incorporation of a Trickster figure are evidence that my efforts to deepen my explicit knowledge on my research topic were already becoming internalised to Nonaka & Takeuchi's tacit knowledge (1995).

### **"Lost, Seeking Found": According to Plan**

The first *Færwhile* story, "Lost, Seeking Found", was composed between 3 November 2009 and 12 March 2010 (apart from some later copyedits). The composition process for this story did not deviate drastically from my established prose-writing process, though my goals for the story's remediation were in place from the first line: the digital version would be in Adobe Flash, incorporating imagery and movement while maintaining a linear structure. The choice of Flash, mimicking other Flash fictions such as "Consensus Trance, Part 1" (Campbell 2009) and *Inanimate Alice* (Pullinger & Joseph 2005), made for a relatively straightforward remediation, involving minimal effects on the third-person perspective, the story structure, and reader interaction. The goals for the analogue version of "Lost" were to introduce a major

character (Ben), the driving conflict of *Færwhile* (Ben and Lilly's quest to reunite), and the overarching theme of *Færwhile*: everyone is lost, and not all can be found. The goals for the digital version of "Lost" were the same; in addition, the digital chapter serves as an entry into digital fiction for uninitiated readers, as its traditional, linear structure and minimal level of interactivity do not present a significant barrier in terms of familiarity and accessibility, similar to *Inanimate Alice*. As such, the finished digital artefact did not introduce a significant deviation from my established writing process; the composition process of the analogue version of "Lost" was quite similar to "Last Stop Bar & Grill".

### **"Puerta Cerrada de Unman": A Story in Search of a Medium**

"Puerta Cerrada de Unman", the second story in the sequence, was planned in much the same way as "Lost, Seeking Found". The first draft, written in first-person perspective and narrating Amelia's introduction to *Færwhile* just as "Lost" was Ben's introduction, was composed from 12 December 2009 to 15 December 2009. Unlike "Lost", however, I did not have clearly set goals about the form the digital version might take. Revision notes for Draft 1, dated 9 April 2010 (see Appendix B), indicate that while the narrative voice was working quite well, the story was rushed, lacking in story development: the narrative was not sufficiently communicating Amelia's conflict (that of a lonely 21<sup>st</sup> century digi-phile living in a rural and technologically sluggish community). It was a chronological narrative, beginning with Amelia in her grandfather's pub at closing time, progressing to her trip up the hill to the standing stones, and eventually entering the doorway Tal (the Trickster) offers her into *Færwhile*. The chronological sequence moved too quickly, pressing Amelia to get up the hill to the doorway to *Færwhile*, allowing very little exploration of Amelia's relationship with her environment, her family, and her world, before shuttling her off to a new one. The result was that her motivation, and thus her conflict, was not made clear in the narrative; the purpose of her actions was not apparent, and therefore her story seemed arbitrary and forced.

The second draft of "Puerta", completed shortly after these revision notes were made, added elements of character backstory and environment, but continued to implement a chronological structure. A fallow period of four months followed this draft; the text was not meeting my rhetorical goals, but I could not yet outline a new

plan. Marilyn Cooper notes that materials of composition hold "specific potentials irrespective of the interests of a culture or a designer" (2005, 36); this character's material translation was thus far certainly not meeting my interests or goals. Frank Smith describes the solution for this particular disconnect: "The intentions are not a model of what the text will be like; many aspects of the text may be different from the original intentions, and intentions for what the text will be like may often be lacking until particular parts of the text are actually produced" (1982, 111). In July 2010, I hit upon a way forward, which was to produce a new part of the text: the digital version. Planning notes on 22 July 2010 firmly cast Amelia's digital text as "an amalgamation of blog entries, twitter feeds, and chats" (Appendix B, 227). The revision notes at this time offer a window into the cognitive shift in planning that occurred:

Why is it so linear? Play with time. It's boring. It's a very short segment, and it's mimicking 'Lost, Seeking Found's structure too closely. So, new structure. Think about her, about how she wants her world to work. I.e., she's a digital-philiac [sic] - she loves the digital world, communicates in the digital world as much as she possibly can. To me, this seems to indicate her story might want to be a hypertext. Thus, the print story itself needs to mimic that thinking. (Appendix B, 226)

This evaluation of the current text reshaped the goals for the text in a concrete fashion by finally considering the digital aspect of the character, and what form her digital text would take, a demonstration of the importance of writerly interactions with the fictional world and text-produced-so-far during the composition process. By considering the character and the narrative perspective, I was able to re-evaluate the rhetorical goals for this story, specifically with regard to how this particular character would shape and communicate her story. The digital version (the "Puerta Cerrada de Unman" blog) was completed in July 2010; the final major draft (3) of the print was completed in August 2010. In composing the digital version, I had addressed the source of the dissonance between my intentions for the print text and its translation: the narrative failed to structurally or linguistically reflect the character of the narrator (Amelia). The linear structure failed to deepen the character and her conflict; as a character whose favoured social interactions came in the form of web chats, text messages, and discussion forums, Amelia's interaction with her world, both real and virtual, was hyperlinked. Her story, however, was stuck in sequential page turns.

Further, the language of the first and second drafts offered little in the way of digital parallels; the only representations of digital interactions came in the form of the

text message exchanges between Amelia and Tal. Otherwise, the story was written exclusively through prose text. John R. Hayes & Linda Flower note that revision "can be triggered not only by dissonance between intention and text but also by the discovery of better things to say, by the negative evaluation of a plan, and by failure to comprehend the text" (1986, 1111). In the case of "Puerta", the dissonance between intention and text was ameliorated by the negative evaluation that the text was certainly not meeting its rhetorical goals; the "discovery of better things to say" occurred only when the digital elements of the text as a whole entered into consideration. In short, Amelia's story needed to be told through the digital before the prose story could take its true form.

This laborious and frustrating sequence of composition exposed a fallacy in my overall composition plan for the *Færwhile* multimodal project: as a prose writer, I had planned to write all the analogue texts first, then remediate into digital form. Thomas B. Ward & E. Thomas Lawson, in their 2009 breakdown of how speculative fiction writers create new worlds, describe this as the "path-of-least-resistance" method, referring to "the tendency of individuals to retrieve and use highly specific, *basic-level* instances of stored concepts when they create novel ideas within conceptual domains" (198, emphasis original). I based my new fictional "world" — the digital composition — in a basic-level instance of an analogue text, my tacit knowledge of the latter driving the composition; my tacit knowledge of digital fiction had not yet expanded sufficiently for the multimodal composition necessary in this project. I believed the prose story needed to work on its own before it could be remediated into digital format; I had imposed an inflexibility on my creative practice, generating such a "creative tension" (Senge, et al. 1994, 195) that it took a significant effort to rectify the distance between the reality of the text-so-far with my personal vision of the character and her story. Ward & Lawson note that the path-of-least-resistance method can result in unoriginal ideas, limited to the properties of that basic-level instance (2009). By limiting myself to my mental model of prose composition for a multimodal story, the composition process broke down quite quickly. My knowledge of digital fiction had expanded, and I had engaged more with digital-oriented characters and narratives, but I had not yet constructed a mental model that afforded a fully multimodal composition process.

## **The Final Chapters: Multimodal Composition at Work**

In monitoring the text produced to this point, the rhetorical problem had restructured itself in response to the months-long creative tension that occurred in the composition of "Puerta Cerrada de Unman". Both my goals for the text and my knowledge of the media had evolved, until I understood, like Andy Campbell, that the composition process for multimodal works must necessarily be multimodal, rather than progressing in a linear fashion as a prose-then-digital remediation. The task environment had changed — no longer was the rhetorical problem merely to shape a narrative, given a character and a particular conflict. The rhetorical problem now incorporated the need for a narrative that could be built in both print and digital media. The final four stories in the novella ("Awake the Mighty Dread", "Threading the 'While", "Streams Slipping in the Dark", and "Swallowing the Tale's Tail") demonstrate an evolved composition practice, with a more integrated, multimodal planning and revision process.

### *"Awake the Mighty Dread"*

"Awake" is the first piece written with this fully realised rhetorical problem: the story required elements that would function in both analogue and digital works, so I incorporated digital platform selection into the planning process. It was in this story, fruitfully, that my explicit knowledge of digital platforms and their affordances became established enough to influence and shape the generation and translation activities. Jenny Weight, based on her own digital composition practice, describes this as an effect of the text-as-apparatus: "As author mutates into programmer, texts transform into a range of possibilities and circumstances — it may be better to conceive of texts in the text-as-apparatus as environments rather than as traditional narratives" (2006, 434). My knowledge of these digital platforms and their affordances — the "text-as-apparatus" — had developed much more fully by the time I began drafting "Awake"; multimodal composition entered the process early in this piece, as I immersed the story in the digital environment in the generation activities, though translation remained delineated.

In selecting interactive fiction, via Inform7's coding platform, as "Awake"'s digital expression, the generation of the story centred on additional priorities to character and conflict. Nick Montfort notes that world-building takes on a much larger significance in interactive fiction: "It is a simulated world, which in practice is

represented computationally in some sort of data structure or collection of objects" (2003, viii). Aaron Reed echoes this, stressing that "interactive fiction's strongest storytelling tools are objects and settings" (2011, loc. 904). The manner in which interactive fiction is coded — with "rooms" forming the storyworld and "objects" with which the player-character can interact, and the ability for the player to experience the storyworld outside of the author-created order — affected the prose translation process. The early draft was focused on building a detailed, rich story setting that encouraged the player-character to move around — to get on and off a train, to open doors, fly in balloons, explore castles, and talk to nonplayer-characters.

Writing with a plan for interactivity also opens up possible paths the character could take; while the analogue text would necessarily restrict itself to the path chosen by the author, the digital version could allow several or all of them to exist for the reader/player, forming multiple "potential narratives" (Montfort 2003, 14) from one character and a given environment. These potential narrative paths then fed back into the revisions of the analogue text: Lilly's flights of fantasy as she frequently descends into "what if" scenarios at various points in the text. In this manner, the possibilities for multiple pathways that are inherent in an interactive fiction find parallels in the analogue text, which restricts itself to the narrative pathway defined by the writer while still incorporating glimpses of the multiple potential narratives.

### *"Streams Slipping in the Dark"*

"Streams Slipping in the Dark" was originally written with a similar intention in the digital version as "Awake the Mighty Dread": a hyperfiction with multiple narrative pathways woven together by strategically placed hyperlinks. This early goal for the piece is quite evident in its narrative structure, which is bound tightly to a mappable world, with active decision trees leading to a convergence in the various narrative paths. "Streams" also pushes aspects of metafictional commentary in the form of the asides between the Storyteller and the Trickster, who narrate separate threads (or so it seems) throughout the novella. This plays into the unique aspects of digital fiction, as it affords multi-dimensional, unnatural narrators (see Chapter 4).

### *"Threading the 'While'"*

The digital version of "Threading the 'While'" was not composed for this project,

as its planned Flash platform had already been explored in "Lost, Seeking Found". Nonetheless, its analogue version illustrates the influences of my expanding knowledge in digital fiction and platforms. "Threading" was a story influenced by the characteristics of its intended digital environment, a virtual world similar to *Second Life* and Neal Stephenson's "Metaverse" (1992). The rhetorical problem was thus centred on a narrative that could exist in a virtual location (such as a Flash environment); the visual world became a priority not only in the setting of the narrative, but the actions of it. Weight's 2006 text-as-apparatus appears in this story not only in the creation of it, but in the metafictional aspects; in order for the characters to move forward in their quest(s), they had to break down their environment into a text, a coded cognitive process, to find the core of the world they had built and move into the next.

### *"Swallowing the Tale's Tail"*

"Swallowing the Tale's Tail" was partially drafted in November 2010, but was not completed until January 2012. The rhetorical problem for this piece was specifically to offer a clear denouement. As Chapter 4 discusses, the novella progresses through mimetic third-person perspective to a layered multiple perspective narration; in this final chapter, the perspective (apparently) cycles back to a mimetic first-person narration. This is the only piece in which Lilly, the central catalyst for the entire tale, narrates her own story. What is communicated through this section, however, is that in actuality, Lilly is the only narrator. The Trickster and the Storyteller are both voices of one fractured little girl who dreamed an escape world so fiercely that she made it tangible enough for others to come find her.

In the analogue text, this intention expresses itself in the changing visual style of the font, and the shift from Lilly's narration to a third-person narration as Lilly fades away and Ben, Amelia and Hal take up the story where she left off, demonstrating that effectively everyone becomes the narrator of their own stories. The expression of this intention in the digital version begins in a note made at the end of Draft 1: "I see [Lilly's] dream world as a bit of a maze, arbitrarily connected as it might be in a child's mind" (28 November 2010) (see Appendix C, 230). The digital text represents this multiple narration visually, as the lexias are presented from various characters' points of view, and thus the font and colour of the written language matches the covert narrator. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 4, the morphing icon button that advances the text to each

new lexia represents the covert narrators visually, questioning who the narrator is — who has power in the text. The visuals shift with each click, merging the narrators into one; the message here is delivered visually in addition to verbally.

### *Print as Visual Text*

The use of different fonts for different narrators in each of these analogue stories was a change made late in the revision process. The revision process was also informed by my growing knowledge of digital fiction, as well as my growing awareness of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's visual literacy (2006), as I began to "account for how visual cues with varying degrees of detail can supplement verbal cues to serve participant-indexing functions" (Herman 2010, 87). As I worked on each of these pieces, various aspects of each medium fed back into other modes: my tacit knowledge of digital affordances and advantages influenced the composition process, but also later revisions of the analogue text. After drafting both the analogue and digital versions of a chapter, I frequently found that the unique affordances of digital media had altered my mental model of the narrative so that the analogue draft no longer matched my refined goals for the piece. Found images, created images, alterations made in adapting the text, all reshaped the story I had originally planned.

A prime example of this is perhaps the most simple: the various fonts representing different narrators appear quite late in the composition process — only in the January 2012 revisions. While the novella remains in Kress's author-dictated order (2005, 7; 16), a convention of the book or printed text, multimodal elements that also engage the reader on a visual level begin to emerge. While these effects are certainly not restricted to digital environments, and have been used extensively by other writers,<sup>23</sup> this is the first instance in which I have used them in my prose writing — a clear effect of expanding digital fiction knowledge and visual literacy on the part of the composer.

### **Conclusion**

Jim Porter, in his 2003 description of his evolution from pencil-and-paper writer to self-described "cyberwriter", states that:

The technological past matters. It shapes the writer and writes the body in significant ways — etching itself on the writer's consciousness and

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the use of visual mode in written language texts, see Drucker 1994, and more recently, Wurth, Espi & van de Ven 2013.



body, influencing how the writer learns to compose and how the writer communicates in a social milieu. Our ideologies about writing, about composing, about rhetorical situation are formed in these various technological pasts, etched by various technologies (390).

Technology etched itself into my composition process, evolving it from monomodal to multimodal practice. The Practitioner Model of Creative Cognition (Chapter 2) has provided a solid framework from which to analyse the effects of this shift in my composition process. The technology of digital media, or the "text-as-apparatus" (Weight 2006), altered the rhetorical situation in creating these fictional texts; in addition to the familiar rhetorical problem of creating a compelling character-driven narrative, digital media added additional considerations, such as multiple modes, reader interaction, and non-traditional story structures.

As my long-term memory, or explicit knowledge, of digital fiction and its affordances developed, my composition practice adapted to these additional dimensions. "[W]hile technology-afforded multimedia tools make it comparatively easy for an author to realize a vivid text, they also make it a multiplicatively more complicated matter to vividly realize an authorial intention" (Nelson, Hull & Smith 2008, 416). In creating a digital text, the writer is no longer constrained to making meaning solely through written language. The new digital media are exciting, allowing writers to create meaning through whatever mode is most suitable, but at the same time this multiplicity of narrative modes significantly increases the creative decisions that have to be made. The digital writer's "composing process is a collaborative process of mediating between the prose she writes for the reader, the programs and systems she anticipates underlying that prose...In this anticipation, the text endlessly recedes from her control" (Sloane 2000, 40). As I have seen in my own practice, this complexity can lead to changes in narrative structure, narrative perspective, multiplicity in narrative voice, and in the actual world-building for the story. These changes can be both positive in that they present new and under-explored potentials in a writer's fiction, and negative in that the writer is plunged into unfamiliar territory with many possible paths and very little navigation.

What helps to guide the writer in this unfamiliar territory is to make it as familiar as possible. "Involving and marshaling background knowledge...is part of the work of accomplishing the social event of reading or writing that is underway, a way of sustaining the social contexts that account for or display emerging understanding"

(Brandt 1992, 329); the writer must actively seek to expand his/her explicit knowledge, in order to internalise it into the tacit knowledge that is so important to composing a coherent narrative with depth and meaning. As my explicit knowledge of digital fiction and multimodal texts developed, my tacit understanding of narrative expanded, my process adjusted to the affordances of the new media, and the texts that emerged became more appropriately suited for their multimodal forms. Without coding an interactive fiction, my tacit knowledge would not have been sufficient to design a setting and character that would be successful within that medium. Without exploring what other digital writers have created, I would not have the literacy required to engage fully with the various semiotic systems of meaning-making that digital media offers. In this stage of learning, of developing knowledge, I did not shape the media to suit my purposes; rather, I rearranged my practice to suit the media, and in doing so discovered entirely new (to me) avenues for creating story. "In writing, meaning is made at the moment when 'that which is to be meant' is fused with 'that which can mean it', that is, when a meaning is matched with a form/signifiers by the writer, in the most apt fashion possible" (Kress 2003, 39). By changing my explicit knowledge, widening it to include new methods for creating meaning, I was able to chart the previously unknown territory of digital fiction, at least on a rudimentary level, so that "that which I meant" could connect much better within "that which meant it".

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

When asked for advice on writing, the author/screenwriter Neil Gaiman responds "Write. Finish things. Keep writing" (2013, n.p.), a common refrain among writers and artists. The message here is that we learn by doing; the experience of writing, of re-writing, of trying again and again to craft something that resembles the ideal imagined, that creates meaning and inspires emotion, all of it coalesces eventually into a growing body of tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). It is the process of research and learning that artists and writers have practiced for thousands of years. This project has certainly built on those notions of craft and learning-by-doing, but it has also attempted to translate that gained tacit knowledge into a clear communication of explicit knowledge, represented in this critical exegesis.

The work contained in this thesis represents both components of practice-led research: the creative artefact and the critical discussion of the knowledge gained through the creative endeavour. The purpose of this project was to explore how shifting from an established prose writing practice to multimodal composition of multimedia works affects both the practice and the narrative structures of the artefacts. Like many artists before me, I was interested in how a new medium (digital) would interact with familiar narrative devices and structures, how my writing could be refreshed by engagement with alternative communicative modes, and how using different tools could result in different and innovative stories.

When the project began, I could not predict the discoveries and connections — craft-oriented and theory-oriented — that I would make in the course of this research, but I developed a method of working that left me open to serendipity (as defined by Makri & Blandford 2012a, 2012b) and allowed me to evaluate my work as critically as is possible in self-research. The practice-led project was grounded in the creative work, the practice directed toward the research question at hand. *Færwhile* was designed from the ground up to test and explore aspects of composition practice and narrative structures in multimodal works: the novella was designed as a linear analogue text with an Aristotelean dramatic arc, while containing chapters that could be broken out into the

digital as separate episodes. Each chapter could therefore be translated to a different digital form — whether hyperfiction, blog, interactive fiction, etc. — allowing a wide variety of digital composition that enabled a robust examination of the affordances of digital media. Critical evaluation of this creative practice was conducted through a combination of auto-ethnomethodology to collect observations on process, reflective analysis of those observations in terms of the cognitive processes involved in composition, and media-specific analysis of the artefacts through relevant literary, media, and narratological theory.

## **Conclusions**

The results of this comprehensive methodology demonstrate the profound effects of multimodal composition on both the creative process and the narrative structures in the artefacts. Planning works that would incorporate text, visual, audio, and reader interaction refocused the translation process into multiple representations, allowing that translation a more direct route through media-specific semiotic systems; e.g., a planned setting could be translated more directly as an image, rather than translating a visual to written language. The artefacts also demonstrate narrative effects of multiple representation and multimodal layering in the composition process, as the pieces engage in unnatural (anti-mimetic) narrative structures.

Expansion of theme and metaphor was facilitated by the materiality of digital media. Awareness of the affordances of the available forms of digital media allows for selection of specific platforms to best suit the rhetorical situation at hand; the materiality of each genre of digital media influences these choices significantly. The semiotic form, the physical interaction with the work, and the memory of the work shape the unique material affordances of literary digital media, as the compilation of code, hardware, and user/reader experience coalesce to form meaning (Bouchardon & Heckman 2012). The hyperlink, spatial movement in both text-based and graphics-based storyworlds, navigation through nonlinear story spaces, and the semantic feedback inherent in multiple communication modes offer an impressive array of possibilities for meaning-making. When crafted through a practice that incorporates an awareness of media-specific affordances, this recombination of narrative reflects and amplifies the underlying themes and metaphors of the fabula.

The affordances of digital media also permeated the diegesis (Ciccoricco 2012, 260) of the narratives themselves, as the writing moved from mimetic narrative to anti-mimetic or unnatural narrative. The conventions of some of the digital media I was working with, notably interactive fiction, naturalise some aspects of unnatural narration, such as the use of second-person perspective and instances of extradiegetic metalepsis. On a deeper level, however, the process of multimodal composition, with its layers of communication modes and composition windows for the necessary aspects of each (such as code, image manipulation, written text, audio recording, text-as-displayed, etc.), led to a layered narrative in the form of multiple narration and metalepsis. While the effects of these unnatural narrative elements can be "discontinuous, discordant, and confusing" (Beja 1979, 76) on first reading, the result is a centripetal (Richardson 2006) narrative that conveys its metaphor in its narrative structures as well as its semiotic signs: characters — and by extension all people — are capable of taking control of their own narration, and thus control of their own stories. This progression of metaphorical meaning expression into the narrative structures arose from the shift to multiplicity in the cognitive composition processes, which facilitated experimentation beyond the level of semiotic expression, and across the boundaries of narration and authority.

The materiality of the planned composition affects the narrative, but so too do the materials that arise serendipitously: namely, "found" art that is surfed, sampled, and manipulated (Amerika 1997) to create new digital texts. Digital artists often appropriate works offered in the exhibition spaces of the Internet (Currah 2007) and shared through commons licensing to permit derivatives and recombination. This practice not only creates an Internet gift economy, but also has significant effects on the creative artefacts themselves, as the found piece shapes and even alters the direction and form of the new artefact in a process of implicit collaboration. More than mimicry, palimpsest, or intertextuality, this implicit collaboration has implications for attribution, copyright, monetization, and authorship, as the ease with which digital media can be copied, shared, manipulated, and distributed (all the while leaving the "original" intact) makes this type of appropriation widespread, approaching normative, in shared Internet spaces.

From seeking these resources to drafting the analogue stories, developing multimodal narratives altered my composition practice in its base instance: the cognitive processes engaged in planning and translation. As such, the monomodal practice I had established in my prose writing underwent a fundamental shift, and the

method planned for the creative works (write the prose novella then adapt to the digital) underwent a significant evolution as I developed explicit knowledge about digital fiction which was gradually internalised to tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). The rhetorical situation had changed from the sole possibility of the printed page to the multiple possibilities of a myriad of digital platforms with varying emphases on visual, navigation, and reader interaction, allowing for better matching of signified to signifier. As my long-term memory grew with regard to these possibilities and their affordances, so my planning and translation processes needed to evolve to accommodate them. The seemingly straightforward method of print-to-digital adaptation was no longer appropriate, and as a result I developed a multimodal composition practice that translated the narratives more directly into their best-matched semiotic forms, rather than relying on the familiar language of print to serve as a translator.

### **Significance of Conclusions**

Taken as a whole, these conclusions offer significant insights for creative writers — both analogue and digital — as well as narratologists examining multi- and transmedia texts. N. Katherine Hayles makes an eloquent argument in favour of media-specific post-textual analysis (2002); these chapters shape an analogous argument in favour of media-specific composition. In exploring the effects of digital media upon practice and narratives, this thesis posits that writers should develop both explicit and tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) about the affordances of the narrative media at their disposal in order to craft narratives whose media best suit their meaning, and vice versa. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that an act is not creative unless it introduces novelty to its domain, which is recognised by the field, and that the person engaged in the creative act must internalise the system of domain and field in order to achieve the level of innovation required for novelty (1996, 28). By this token, any artist working with an incomplete understanding of their medium is unlikely to engage fully with its affordances and limitations; s/he would struggle mightily to push the boundaries of the medium for the purposes of innovation.

As for the field of digital fiction, the conclusions offered here deepen narratological understanding of electronic texts. Scholars have noted the tendency of digital fictions to explore the processes of cognition in terms of memory and associations (Hayles 2002; Ensslin 2012); these findings offer explicit knowledge of

how digital media facilitate these themes. By exploring the effects of digital composition upon my cognitive processes of composition in terms of long-term memory, planning, translation, and serendipity, these chapters make explicit how creating multimodal texts results in a layered composition process that easily translates to multiple layers of communication modes and narrative structures. Appreciation for the material affordances of digital media and the cognitive effects of digital composition can offer transmedia narratologists a deeper foundation for media-specific analysis of electronic texts.

Looking beyond the creative and scholarly domains of digital fiction, these findings can also contribute to examinations of digital fiction as a narrative genre. While this study restricted itself to the examination of the practice and the text, it offers a foundation for developing future studies into digital fictions as narrative forms and into reader response and market awareness. Digital fiction remains a largely experimental form in Western literature (Eskelinen 2008), without an established publishing market or model (and some, such as Stuart Moulthrop, argue that there is nothing wrong with that [2011]). Yet other forms of digital art and experimentation have proved commercially successful: online and video games are the obvious example, but collaborative Internet spaces such as YouTube and Sourceforge are also significant. The insights offered here regarding cognition and narrative effects on the writer's side of the communicative equation can be built upon to study cognition and narrative reception on the reader's side of the equation, and eventually extrapolated to encompass market as well.

### **Future Work**

This thesis presents a finite project necessarily focused on a narrow area of interest. In conducting this research, however, I have identified several areas for further exploration. *Færwhile*, while presented here as a complete novella, was designed as an expandable storyworld, with the possibility for an infinite number of embedded storyworlds and intertwined characters. I originally planned, and still do, to create the digital *Færwhile* as an online storyworld, wherein readers can not only experience the story as I have crafted it, but also become authors of narrative threads within the canonical storyworld itself. This collaboration would blur the line between canon and fan fiction, but would also expand the pool of creativity exponentially (assuming a

sufficient level of readership is attained). Similar projects have taken shape on the collaborative site hitRECORD.org in film, music, and published books, with intriguing results. The expansion of *Færwile* into this collaborative text would serve as not only a significant font of creative exploration, but could also foster further research into storyworld, and reader-author interaction (building on my 2010 study of online author-driven communities).

As noted, this study focused on the practice and narrative effects of digital writing; the next logical step is to examine reader response, in order to gain a more complete picture of digital fiction's impact. Jane Yellowlees Douglas and Andrew Hargadon have conducted targeted reader response studies into hypertext and the cognitive processes readers employ to construct narratives from nonlinear sequences (Douglas 1992a, 1992b), and the pleasure readers derive from different forms of engagement with a text (Douglas & Hargadon 2000).<sup>24</sup> These studies offer a foundation for designing further research into reader response, in particular how readers engage differently in digital fiction than they do in more popular (and thus familiar) genres such as games, novels, or films. As a writer, I am excited by the possibilities of the new digital media to transform a new genre of narrative, and I have observed this same excitement in other writers, both professionals and students; why, then, has this excitement for novelty not translated to readers as well? A series of focused studies on reader reactions to specific digital texts, as well as surveys of the reading environment (which would include the spaces in which readers engage with narratives for pleasure, as well as the devices) is called for to gain a deeper understanding into why digital fiction remains largely marginalised to academia and experimental writers (as Markku Eskelinen notes), and to offer a direction to develop the genre further.

As a professional writer, I am interested not only in the aesthetic and theoretical approaches to writing, but also in the publishing aspects related to my work. As I discussed in Chapter 5, most digital fiction is largely created and distributed in the collaborative spaces of an Internet gift economy; in other words, nobody gets paid. Practitioner-scholars occasionally fund their creative work through art grants, but there is not yet a clear economic model for publishing digital fiction, which may be another factor in why the genre remains, by and large, an experimental, academic exercise. Of course, it may be a secondary effect of the lack of popularity with readers, if one applies

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<sup>24</sup> For a sampling of other studies into reader activities in transmedia texts, see: Burgess 2008, Chaouli 2005, Hayles 2007b, Jenkins 2006, Lemke 1998 & 2004, Mackey 2008, and Thomas 2007 & 2010.



the capitalist adage that if consumers really want something, the market will find a way to make money off of it. Nonetheless, digital fiction is a figure among many in the Internet economy; the collaborative gift economies have given rise to a number of digital genres that have persisted for a number of reasons (blogs, fan fiction, photo and art sharing) but have yet to shape a consistent publishing model.

Overall, this research offers significant insight into the practice of digital writing, into its method and materiality, its effects on the cognitive processes of composition, and the liquidity of narrative structures that are still adapting to these new media. Digital fiction is a genre still emerging from its infancy, relative to established narrative media such as oral storytelling, the book, and even film; the conclusions presented underscore the importance of comprehending the effects of new technology on practice and narrative. There is a wealth of research still to be done in the e-lit domain, and technological and economical developments will continue to shape and affect e-lit for quite some time. The discoveries and theories presented here will inform these future works, both creatively and critically, enabling a more developed understanding of a still-developing genre.

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## Appendix A

### FuturePics LoveSounds

You don't remember being in London. You don't remember that girl, or standing on that bridge.

Your friend Syd has a FaceBook strategy: only accept pub friends. He only connects with someone if he'd be willing to buy them a pint at the pub. You, however, prefer to friend anyone and everyone the damn site suggests. You have 597 FB friends. IRL, you have about four. Four who would ever take pictures of you and post them online, and tag you in their albums.

Staring at your face on some stranger's wall, you think maybe Syd's got a point. You certainly don't know who "Monkey Dozen" is. They don't even have any identifiable information on their profile – just a link to a YouTube video of Rick Astley. They've made no status reports, no one else has ever posted on their wall, you have no mutual friends, and they're not tagged in any pictures.

The only album on their page is of you. In London. Where you haven't been in months. Yet when you look at pic #3, it's there, the piercing you got last week. And the girl standing there next to you is a complete stranger – you don't go for those choppy dyke haircuts.

You send your 597th FB friend Monkey Dozen a PM: *Nice photoshop, mate. Who are you again?* It's probably rude, but how can they expect you to remember who they are out of the hundreds of sham friends you have?

Waiting for a response is a waste of a day, but it's not like you're a police officer or a search and rescue pilot. Nuclear war won't erupt if you slag off for a day. Besides, you have to know where this random guy got pictures of you in the last week. You haven't been anywhere, not since the bender that led to the piercing in the first place. You were pissed, but not so pissed you spent a day in London without remembering it.

You wait an hour, an hour and a half. Monkey Dozen still hasn't responded, and your stomach gurgles, so you wander down the street for a coffee and some danish thing with unidentifiable jammy stuff swathed over it.

When you return, your new friend has posted a new album. There you are,

striding along, same shirt you're wearing now, your sunglasses on even though the Welsh rain has dotted them completely over, coffee in one hand and danish in the other. The danish is missing a bite.

You stare at the danish in the picture, and at the untouched pastry on your desk, obscuring that TPS report you forgot to put a cover sheet on.

Before you even finish viewing the new album, before you think to close the blinds on your office window against the stalker, another album goes up.

London again. It's dark, the pictures shaky and amateurish, unable to compensate for the lack of light. Streetlights glow orange in a drizzle that muffles anything that might have been in focus. Your face is so fuzzy in the first shot, unrecognizable until you roll your mouse over for the tag frame. There you are.

Oh, shit. That's not cool. For one, you're naked. In a gutter. Your eyes are shut, your head drooping to one side.

Your hand rattles so hard your ring plays a staccato on the plastic mouse. There are only three photographs here, each merely a zoomed image of the first. The last is unmistakable: that's your face. There's your nose, your mouth, your new piercing. There's the scar from falling through that window last year, slicing your eyebrow in two but luckily missing your eye.

You pick up the phone to call the police. Surely this counts as some sort of threat, as evidence of a crazed stalker. You've heard of them, those psycho women who peep on their exes' profiles, blogs, status updates. The freakish men who just feel so close to the celebrity via their online identity, even though it's probably just the star's publicist tapping out their "innermost secrets". The desperate moms who drive their children's rivals to suicide with their endless insults and accusations in comment sections.

You should have listened to Syd. Monkey Dozen is definitely not someone you know well enough to hail in the pub. You could have avoided this.

The notifications flag pops up again. This time it's a new message. Grimacing, you open your inbox.

*From: Monkey Dozen*

*Message: I was there. I took the shots, 12 hours from now.*

The phone stays in its cradle. You know you should pick it up, should call right away, but something tells you that if you dial the emergency number, it will all stop. That should be what you want, but then you'll never know, will you? Sure, they could



find the guy's IP address – and something tells you he's got an anon proxy, so even that's not for sure – and the pics are probably just really good Photoshop work, but you'd never know why.

The phone rings under your hand, and you jump so hard your coffee explodes over the office, over all those files you meant to organize last month. You answer it as you use your ruined report to mop up, before you can even think that it might be the ubiquitous Monkey Dozen.

"Mark, thank Christ I caught you."

"Andie?" You haven't heard her voice in ages, and she sounds tired and rough.

"Marky, I'm stuck in London. Some twat stole my purse, I've got no cash, no ID, no train tickets, no nothing."

"Damn." You sit back in your chair, relieved to face an ordinary, if not everyday, problem. "You need me to wire you some money?"

"Can't. I thought about it, but I have to present ID to collect it." She sighs into the phone. "Problem is, I have to be back by tomorrow for that meeting, but I can't get a replacement ID till then."

"Damn," you say again.

"What I was hoping," she said, her voice pleading, "is that you could run by my apartment, pick up my passport and spare bankbook, and bring them to me. We can catch the early train in the morning and be back in time for the meeting."

You close your eyes. London. Those pictures, twelve hours from now. Ten minutes ago, there was no way that was going to happen. It was a joke, a hoax. But now...

"Mark? I know it's shit of me to ask."

"Fuck it," you say. You don't believe in spooky shit. You don't even believe that BS about alligators in the sewers. "Yeah, I'll be on the next train."

Before you go, you change your shirt, making sure you pick one that didn't appear in any of the photos.

\*\*\*

London is dry, but overcast as usual, the cranes rising over the city to scratch the bulbous hanging rainclouds. You step tentatively off the train, peering around for Andie, and for anyone with a camera. The last proves an exercise in exhaustion, as everyone over the age of five has a cameraphone or digital snaphooter. Herds of tourists shuffle around like sheep in a loading pen, mucking up the orderly flows of

commuters, flashing shots off of the the ceiling, the platform numbers, and their own gaping faces.

You rub your face. You're hungry, and you want this day to be over with. You unfriended Monkey Dozen before you left the office, and removed all the tags on those photos, but it doesn't unstick them from your mind. You can still see yourself lying there in that alley, naked and still.

"Mark!"

You turn to find you've just walked right past Andie. "You changed your hair," you say, stunned.

"Thought I'd get a decent haircut while I was in the big city." She pats the shorter, lighter style. "Stopped for coffee afterward and someone nicked my bag right out from under me."

She's the girl in the photos. The one you didn't recognize. The one with you on the bridge. The hair changes the shape of her face, her coloring.

"What?" she asks.

"Nothing. Just a long, weird day." You shake your head, and again look around for a shifty stalker type. It's just too hard to tell in such a crowded place. "I guess we're staying in a hotel overnight?"

"Yeah, I found a couple of rooms, but couldn't check in without a credit card." She grimaces. "Let's eat first. I'm starving."

You hand over the ID you picked up from her apartment. You still have a key, even though you haven't been there since those five weeks last summer.

She leads the way, not even noticing you don't talk much. You never talk much anyway, mostly out of self-absorption. You wind up in a dark cafe, happy to eat whatever is on the menu, glad for a back booth where no one can see you. You feel exposed, defenseless.

Andie, however, is on a rampage. Now that you've come to her rescue, she's livid about the robbery, and feeling confident enough to launch into one of her patented bitchfests. You nod and make the right noises, and you help her drink the wine she keeps ordering.

The restaurant is empty by the time you finally pick up your coat to leave. "Train pulls out at 6 a.m. Sleep might be a decent idea," you tell her, and she laughs a little too loudly. You both stagger when you stand up.

"Shit," Andie says. "I think you're drunk."

"Not as drunk as you." And suddenly it's really fucking funny, and you laugh, and you can't stop. You almost throw up, but you keep laughing.

Outside the restaurant, Andie says, "What is so goddamn funny? And why do you keep glancing around like the Doctor's going to show up any minute?"

This sends you off again, and you've stumbled half a block in the direction you think the hotel might be in before you can begin to tell her the story of your day. By the time you tell her how you nearly soiled your trousers over her new haircut, she is doubled over with spasms as well, wheezing in that way she does.

You pass into a pool of gray, underneath a non-functioning streetlight. Andie leans against the pole, her gaze wandering along the locked building fronts. She utters a post-laughter sigh and squints at you.

"You really are a stupid wanker sometimes, you know, Mark."

"Yeah," you say, though you don't think you're as stupid as she clearly does.

"You shouldn't have done what you did to me."

"Sorry?" You cock your head and wait, trying to unravel the knots of the conversation.

"Last summer. That was pretty fucking cold."

"I don't understand. We had a thing, but..."

"A thing. Lovely. It was more than a thing for me." She pushes away from the pole, nodding at someone behind you. "Now you can have your fucking thing back, you selfish shit."

Something whams into your kidneys. A fist, a really big, really hard fist. You gasp and drop to your knees in pain as she crosses her arms and smirks. The fist hits you in the side of the head, and you fall to the concrete, smelling piss and vomit and beer.

"Andie, what the hell?" You just keep looking up at her as a boot connects with your ribs.

She waves a hand, and the barrage ceases. She crouches down to you, hovering over as you strain for air on your hands and knees.

"I thought about it a lot, Mark." She runs a hand over your scalp, digging her fingernails into the knot forming over your temple. "I knew when we started that you were who you were. I just couldn't help it. I couldn't help getting so obsessed. And when you stopped coming around, I followed you. Everywhere. I tried to become what I thought you might want forever. But then we were just friends.

"And you still fucked anything and everything. Seriously, Mark, that hairy-moled 40-year-old from accounting? Your sister's roommate? Your mom's fucking bridge partner? You're disgusting."

She slaps you, hard enough to swell your eyes with reflexive tears.

"I could have keyed your car. I could have trashed your apartment. I could have messaged every female in a 50 mile radius. I could have added you to that dump-him-girlfriend website. I fantasized about so many things."

"So you post weird pictures on Facebook and hire someone to beat me up?" You spit on the pavement, spraying flecks of blood. "You're fucking nuts, Andie."

She frowns. "Sounds like I'm not the only one pissed at you, you whore. You think I'd do something like this then try to get you *not* to come to London? You're the fucking sicko."

Her face convulses, and her hand flicks from your head to your eye. You can't even flinch away, she's so fast, and she snatches the metal ring from your eyebrow. It clinks away on the concrete, the sound registering in your mind before the pain does. Blood streams down your face, stinging your eye and tasting of old pennies.

The image rises in your stuttering mind: your beaten face, your naked body, unconscious in the street. The next image appears, zoomed in, trails of blood in bright pixelated red.

Shouting in fear and pain, you launch at her, shove at her, anything to get her away from you. You spring from the pavement, your ribs screaming at the movement, and hit her on your way up, full in the abdomen. Her breath deflates over you, smelling like the gutter, and you propel her backward.

Into the pole. She strikes it like a gong, and the vibration spreads through her body to yours. Slack, her eyes roll back in their sockets and she crumples to the pavement.

"Shit, man, what did you do?" You turn to her thug, his fingers still curled in rib-crushing fists, his face covered by a lint-balled balaclava. "We was just gonna rough you up some, mate. Fuck this!" He darts off, the slapping of his boots fading into static as the misty rain begins to lick the street.

Half a block away, a car passes, its headlights casting a dim glow over the scene, glinting off Andie's watch. She doesn't move. She doesn't breathe. The foul exhalation you forced out of her was her last.

The scratch of rubber on concrete startles you. "Shit!" You try to yell, but a

trembling whisper is all you can manage. Your chest hurts, and your heart is trying to get the hell out of there.

"I did warn you," the newcomer says mournfully. He's small, wearing a gray suit with a hat and a waistcoat. A watch fob hangs from the waistcoat, and in his hand is a small box camera.

You back away from him as he raises the camera. "This isn't what you showed me. In those pictures, it was me. I was dead."

He shrugs. "Futography is not an exact art, son. I do my best."

You stand there, staring at the man, unable to look at Andie at all. "What...what do I do now?"

The shutter clacks, and he cranks the film wheel. "I'm not a god." He fires off two more shots, then turns to face you. "She looks cold," he comments. Then he walks away from you.

You follow, but the gray suit on the gray street on the gray night disappears in only a few strides. You are left with your torn clothing, your aching bruises, and the corpse of the woman you were once so intimate with. Your train ticket is in your left pocket, your undamaged mobile phone in the other.

The choice is yours.

## **Appendix B**

### **Revision Notes: "Puerta Cerrada de Unman"**

#### **General Revision Comments on Print Draft 1, 9 Apr 2010**

1. Most importantly, her motivation is not made terribly clear. She obviously has quite a complicated history, and her motivation is incredibly simple. But the story rushes, just trying to get her to the stones. The elements of the history that are represented are confusing, not enough to understand why she's doing what she's doing.
2. The voice is working really well. I remember writing the rough draft, being extremely concerned that the voice in each of these stories was going to be so similar, not suited to each character. The voice in this piece is actually kind of jarring after the wistful, false hardness of Ben's story. He's younger, less jaded, less harsh. The differences in their characters definitely comes across in the voice.
3. She needs to interact in a good way with her grandparents. She actually does care about them, but they are part of the insular world that she so desperately wants to leave. Maybe write a scene with them all together, maybe even something that somehow pulls her memories of her parents into it.
4. It needs to slow way, way down. It's too fast, too jarring. I had to keep rereading stuff to figure out what was going on, and I wrote the damn thing!
5. I keep coming back to this image of her climbing the hill, moving farther and farther away from the village, yet able to see it in better and better perspective. Her story has been her efforts to distance herself from the place. So maybe we start in the village, with her and her grandfather in the pub (why not have that interaction?). Then we get little pieces of her history as she moves up the hill, including the forum text from her first meeting with Tal.

#### **General Revision Comments on Print Draft 2 July/Aug 2010**

She's stuck in an isolated village, without enough stimulation. What do people

like that do? They create rich fantasy worlds. There's not enough fantasy in her narrative.

Why is it so linear? Play with time. It's boring. It's a very short segment, and it's mimicking 'Lost, Seeking Found's structure too closely. So, new structure. Think about her, about how she wants her world to work. I.e., she's a digital-philiac - she loves the digital world, communicates in the digital world as much as she possibly can. To me, this seems to indicate her story might want to be a hypertext. Thus, the print story itself needs to mimic that thinking. Maybe even a chat forum? YOU'RE TOO MARRIED TO LITERARY FORMAT, EVEN IN PRINT!!!

Thus...let's play with the structure. Here is draft 2 structure:

1. She's in the pub. Interacts with her grandfather and Gwyn Jones. Bit of characterization, bit of backstory.
2. She's acting up a bit, bored, wanting to talk to someone not an old drunk dude, so her grandfather tells her to go.
3. She walks up the hill. Again, this is a bit boring, as it's used as an excuse for more backstory.
4. She describes the first time she met Tal online (notes indicate to put in chat example).
5. She pings Tal. He does not reply, and she nearly cries. [maybe this is the opening?]
6. She reaches the fairy circle, and waits, hoping for him to reply, sending one more message.
7. A shadow moves across the stones, startling her. She hides from it, and sees one of the stones glowing blue, like a screen.
8. Tal messages her, sends her a live satellite image of herself, in the circle. He shows her a certain spot in the circle, and tells her doors are meant to be opened.
9. Amelia goes to the door, passes through it. She goes down to her station. The screens in the station are messages from Tal, inviting her to come find him (and maybe more...).
10. She goes. (It's really not that tough a decision.)

*Draft 3 - important scenes:*

1. Need something to show her affection/attachment for her family - a reason for conflict, for staying home.

2. Need to SHOW her connection to Tal, via a chat.

*Draft 3 - structure:*

1. Start with her pinging Tal, with no reply. This will build tension - who is she? Who is Tal? Why is he so important at this moment?
2. A bit of setting - she's halfway up the hill. She can see the village, she can see the fairy circle. She herself is midway between worlds, between ages, between societies.
3. Scene with Gwyn Jones in the bar - maybe she sees him stumbling out of the bar, though I'm not sure the transition is really necessary.
4. Maybe a chat session with Tal, from the past, when they've discussed her life in the village, maybe her life with her parents before she came to the village.
5. The fairy circle - sitting in the center, waiting for Tal to reply.
6. A fantasy about the circle - combine thoughts of witches with some sort of cyberpunk theme.
7. Her grandmother finding her tattoo (and Tal's response - see Draft 1).
8. Google Earth/satellite (Tal replies).
9. Moment at the door. This door. Maybe reflect/parallel it with her grandparents' front door, the first day she'd come to live with them.
10. A chat with Tal - an important one, where she truly connected with him.
11. Stairs down to station.
12. Her train ride to her grandparents'.
13. The station. Screens alternating...images of exotic places, B/W images of the village (contrasting them, Tal convincing her to come with him to the pretty shiny places).
14. A memory - an Easter-egg/scavenger hunt her parents set for her. A fun, loving memory, something she'd lost when she'd lost her parents.
15. Tal in the train - is he real, or is he her fantasy?
16. Map on her phone.
17. Her grandparents in their home, quiet, sedate.
18. She leaves them behind, steps onto the next train.

**Planning Notes, Digital Version, 22 July 2010**

- The print can easily be an amalgamation of blog entries, twitter feeds, and chats



interwoven with narrative. But how can the narrative work its way into the digital version? We have the blog entries, the chats, the twitter feeds...but how to get to the immediacy of the story's events?

1. The story can be one blog entry (or two or three, depending on how I might be able to break it up). The comments on the past and the village can link back to earlier entries...The print version can represent this - the main narrative can be broken up by blog entries & Twitter posts. We'll see how it works.
    - Narrative Blog Entries:
      1. The pub. Ostensibly, she can be writing bits of this as she's in the pub, until her grandfather bids her to go. Include tweets, etc.
      2. Maybe a post describing the walk up the hill, as she's waiting for Tal to ping her back.
      3. A last post [incl. audio, maybe?], something sent from the train to Færwhile. Might work.
  2. The twitter feed should feed into the main blog page. Perhaps with short comments...Should it be a separate module on the blog page, or should it sync-post to the blog? I'm thinking sync-post.
- How do the chats work on the digital version? Maybe she copies/pastes them into the blog? and link to the CL secret fo where she and Tal met?

## Appendix C

### Revision Notes: "Swallowing the Tale's Tail"

#### Planning Notes, Early November 2010

- This is the resolution to the entire tale. She and Ben find each other, with Amelia & Hal's help, but it's too late for Lilly - she is nearly gone, and only gets the chance to connect with Ben one last time before she fades away - her mind, in the real world, has been shattered, and so it can no longer travel to the dream world she has been in (created?).
- I like that idea - that this entire world is created by Lilly, and the Trickster is acting on people based on Lilly's needs, whether for her or against her, he doesn't care. In the end, when she dies, is the entire world in danger? Yes, it could collapse, unless someone else takes up the storytelling. Lilly was the storyteller before...now Ben and Amelia will take up the role.

#### Translation Notes, 13 Nov 2010

Notes on "Swallowing the Tale's Tail" 20101113:

[Developed from "Streams Slipping in the Dark" notes] A world that mirrors... cube? No, too clear cut, without giving them much control. A maze (not a labyrinth - a labyrinth doesn't offer choices)...A maze that has multiple entrances...therefore it's several mazes (which may parallel, but never cross) superimposed upon one another. Lilly enters at one site, Ben at another, Amelia at another. In the middle is what? Not the Storyteller...I'm beginning to feel as though this is the FINAL story, not the middle story. Uh-oh. So, maybe...let's split them out. The maze story is "Tale's Tail". "Streams" is Ben and Lilly alone, with Amelia popping into Lilly's side of the story because she was trying to get to Ben, but wound up in Lilly's world as well (to get out of her world, Amelia used her circle, which put her on a train, but it delivers her to Lilly, not Ben).

What: They are all moving through the maze for their various reasons. It should be a bit [Note ends]

## **End of Draft 1 Notes, 28 Nov 2010**

This is all a bit crazy. I have a million different notes for this story, and no real idea of what happens.

Lilly 2 ends with Ben finding Amelia and Lilly. He knows Lilly's story, and he and Amelia have a sense of what is happening to her. They know they have to get to a world that is informed by dreams, in order to follow Lilly back through to her reality and save her there.

I like the idea I had earlier this month (see the note below) about this world being created entirely by Lilly...switching to a new narrator, a new storyteller, one who thus far hasn't had a voice at all. She is creating her dream world, and as she dies, someone else must take it up.

I see her dream world as a bit of a maze, arbitrarily connected as it might be in a child's mind. It will be a bit of a roller coaster ride as well, as she flips between worlds herself (remember, she's never certain which world is reality and which is dream, so in a sense all worlds are both dream and reality to her).

Ben and Amelia are trying to trace the path from the dream world (Lilly in happy storyville — so there will be elements of her favorite stories in pockets) to her real world (where the ever so lovely Rob is shredding her soul. I wish there were a better word than “soul”. It's so lame). That's where the maze comes in, made doubly difficult by the fact that Lilly changes the shape of things every so often.

In the end, when she dies, Ben will choose to stay on in this world, to keep it alive for Lilly, the stories she loved so much. Amelia will entreat him to come with her, to move on, but he's not ready. This opens up FW to more Amelia stories (which I like, because I've connected with her character more than any other), and can give Ben a rest for a while, or for forever if that's what I wind up doing (since I find him somewhat unappealing in his current guise).

So what are the areas that crop up in this story? Obviously, her room in the real world, with crazy shit going down. I'd like to see them go back to the Peter Pan/Tiger Lily thing, just because it didn't get explored much, and it would confuse Ben greatly. I can't help but want to put in a Coraline reference — it just keeps coming up in my mind, and if I don't put it in, some part of me is telling me I will regret it.