

interactions and identities

exploration 2: Interactive Fictions

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1. Links to Explore

Here's a work of interactive fiction discussed in the text. Exploring the site first will give you some ideas to keep in mind as you read through the discussion. You can open the site in a new window by clicking on the URL.

<http://www.whoisflora.net/>

2. Lab

- a. click **here** to download the flash starter file.
- b. click **here** to download the html starter files.

3 . Possibility and Choice in the Interactive Fiction of *Who is Flora?*

A. Introduction: Branches of Fiction

We log onto the internet. Perhaps we check our email, participate in multiplayer games, or conduct research through online libraries. Sometimes we may multitask electronic instant messages while gathering information from websites. We have become exceedingly mobile in cyberspaces teeming with possibilities. The beauty of such a space is its dynamic quality—the internet changes, grows, spins out, and pulls us in. However, we contain a measure of agency in deciding how we use the internet. For example, we click on hypertext links that take us on an online journey through websites we may have never considered before. Interactive fiction mirrors the kinds of choices we make as navigators of such an expansive medium in the work's form and content.

In *Who is Flora?* cyberspace is imagined as an interactive frontier where we become its travelers. On the narrative level, *Who is Flora?* speaks specifically about a lone traveler journeying across the United States for the first time. In other words, how the work of fiction is shaped is reflective of the narrative and vice-versa. This mirrored effect in the form and content of the piece alters our reading practices while using a medium that is familiar to us. We are given multiple possibilities to explore the work, and furthermore, the story we discover is based upon how we choose to read it.

Reading interactive fiction is different than reading non-interactive fiction. Non-interactive fiction, either web-based or in book form, usually does not leave it up to its readers to choose how to read the story. If we open a book, for example, there is an expectation that we will turn its pages seeking its characters and plot while following its linear narrative trajectory. We move from the book's beginning to its inevitable end. If we skip across Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* for example, we cannot comprehend or interpret the story in the way Dickens intended. The way non-interactive fiction is constructed is essential to how the narrative is told, for its form demands a linear reading practice. Examples of literature that play with traditional models of reading do exist; Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (ca. 1760) is an example of 18th century literature that is often cited as a precursor to multilinear interactive fiction.

But interactive digital fictions are constructed as non-linear texts that do not simply play with models of linearity but are essentially different texts that depend on embedded programs. The computational basis of these texts suggests that non-linearity or multi-linearity is not simply a feature or device of the narrative but in fact a characteristic of the text itself. These texts depend on readers making choices about how to read and interpret the story. Readerly hopscotching is not only allowed in interactive fiction, but it is also the work's organizing principle. The intent of interactive fiction focuses on how we choose to navigate the story, just as we decide where and how to explore the internet. Steven Johnson notes in *Interface Culture* that interactive fiction necessitates that readers embark on a journey through the text. We can choose to click on hypertext links that interest us and ignore those that do not, incorporating navigational internet practices into reading practices. In creating an interactive space, the hypertext links themselves become the method by which the story coheres. Even though readers of the same text will have different interpretations of the story depending on how they choose to read it, the experience of discovering the story through personal choice is what Johnson believes is important.

B. Models of Reading and Aesthetics in Interactive Fiction

Janet Murray suggests in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* that the interactive story itself is tied to the navigation of visual space. Unlike our previous example of *Great Expectations*, interactive fiction demands that we consider the multiple ways we read a text in order to comprehend it. Murray explains that interactive fiction leaves it up to the reader and not the author to decide how the work is to be comprehended. However, Murray notes that such non-linearity and mobility through the text also contains a pitfall because readers may not be able to trace their journey through the work; furthermore, multivoiced/multithreaded texts may not provide the satisfaction of “closure” – the pleasure of ending well. According to Murray, readers of interactive texts lack the power to construct and comprehend any one, “true” story because the form and content of the work is designed to resist a singular interpretation through non-linear practices of composing and interpreting.

It's precisely this primacy of interpretation that Sherry Turkle suggests characterizes our postmodern age of digital technologies because of the ways that the graphical interface prevents “looking under the hood.” It is rather the interplay between computer users and their screens, or between users communicating through symbolically coded graphics, that becomes important. This interplay is embodied in what she calls “computational aesthetics” -- individuals maintain different relationships to the use value of their machines. For example, one individual may be interested in the codes used to create a program, while another may be only concerned with the content. Some may even find interest in both the form and content of their computers. The former individual engages in an aesthetic of transparency that places importance on the mechanical functions of the computer. These non-technical “users,” as Turkle calls them, are interested in what the computer can do for them – not in how the computer functions.

Turkle finds that current computer technology places emphasis on the surface level of computer use, de-emphasizing the mechanical importance of the computer. We can think of this paradigm shift in terms of the difference between command-line interfaces and “windowing” interfaces that make use of graphics to guide their users. DOS, an early text-based interface for the personal computer, demanded an elaborate knowledge of command lines in order to program, or simply just to use, the computer. Apple's Macintosh computers, on the other hand, were marketed as “user-friendly” because they obscure the computer's mechanical functions. The philosophy behind windowing interfaces is what Turkle calls an aesthetic of simulation, for the graphical windows function only as a visual representation of the computer's complex mechanics – they do not represent the mechanics themselves.

A reading of Turkle in relationship to interactive fiction suggests the aesthetic of interactivity begins with simulation. Such an aesthetic of simulation indicates that the elaborate mechanics involved in the construction of interactive fiction is obscured in order to place emphasis and value on the content of the stories the fictions tell; at the same time, the coding required for stories to be told at the interface is irrevocably separate from the stories themselves. Readers who navigate the work can be considered “users” for they not only read the story for its content, but also navigate through the story as a computer user.

The form and content of *Who is Flora?* complicates the relationship between users and text through its play on linear and non-linear constructions of visual space and time. Its designer, Travis Leslie Alber, based the work on a series of 1940s-era postcards she obtained from an auction in 1997. The postcards belonged to an unmarried woman who had decided to travel across the United States by herself. Flora, the solitary traveler, eventually amassed a collection of postcards to document her journey or to simply write home to friends and family. Alber, who did not know Flora and could not find someone who did, views these postcards as artifacts of Flora's unknowable past. Alber arranged the postcards by post date and place to reconstruct a partial record of her travels. As she worked to imagine Flora's journey, Alber discovered that her life and travels mirrored Flora's desire for freedom and mobility. Thus, *Who is Flora?* contains the author's reconstruction of the subject's journey and thoughts together with the author's travels. The user accesses a writer who is speculating about a person who is lost to us, for there is no essential or complete version of Flora. Instead of attempting to locate an authentic Flora, Alber can only imagine her. Flora is unrecoverable, but due to Alber's construction of Flora's identity and thoughts, Flora exists in the present in the imagination of the writer and user.

C. Reading *Who is Flora?*

Who is Flora? is designed to present Flora's postcards together with Alber's fiction and personal narrative. In order to communicate both stories, the interactivity of the fiction depends on a multimedia approach. Each of Flora's postcards are presented to the reader in full color, accompanied by 1940s-era music and clickable icons or text rollovers that reveal either Flora's actual writing or Alber's third person narrative of Flora's journey. While the visuals of the postcards evoke a sense of place, the music attends to the time period of Flora's writing. Icons and rollovers exist within the postcards and outside of their graphic spaces. Accessing the narratives requires the user to make a choice on which icons or rollovers to explore. Furthermore, there are two static icons that remain throughout the interactive text. The first is a map of the United States that records the user's journey while following Flora's travels. *Who is Flora?* never lets its users get lost on their journey. The second icon, a graphic of a 1950s car, allows access either to Flora's postcards or Alber's personal travels and thoughts. Like Flora, the users embark on a journey; only we must navigate through the visual space of text and image simultaneously with the non-visual elements of sound and time.

Readers will find a total of five postcards in *Who is Flora?* The first card from Copper Harbor, Michigan depicts two women, backs towards us, sitting on a bench near an overlook. The image here is pregnant with metaphor. Could the two women be representative of Alber and Flora existing in a common space? Or is the card a visual representation of Flora's intent to communicate the expansive opportunities and uncertainty of her journey as her writing on the back of the card suggests? Considering the multimedia approach of *Who is Flora?*, there is not one definitive way to interpret the meaning of the images, for the simultaneity inherent in the design resists such essentialized readings. Alber fills in some of the narrative gaps in Flora's writing by infusing her own into the visual landscape. We can choose to pull down a text box that reveals a third person narrative of Flora's thinking on leaving her hometown to travel into unknown spaces across the United States. We discover that Flora was inspired to travel from her brother's migration overseas to fight in World War II. Flora is then imagined as a woman who seeks independence and experience by traveling alone during 1942—a time when such a lone female traveler was considered to be unthinkable or suspect. We can also choose to click on the car icon to fast forward to 1999 to read Alber's personal thoughts. We then have the option to jump back to Flora's time in 1942. Using the links, we not only navigate across the visual space, but we travel through time as well.

The next postcard from a Greyhound bus terminal in Dayton, Ohio plays with visual representations of time. At the bottom of the screen there is a timeline with several points irregularly marked across it. A graphic of a 1940s-era commercial bus is placed on the timeline and can slide back and forth across the points. We can either move from left to right or right to left. If we choose to use the slider, each point reveals a portion of Flora's writing on the back of the postcard. Whichever way we choose to slide the bus, Flora's writing makes sense; albeit with different interpretations depending which way we slide. A large icon of the familiar Greyhound bus symbol is stationed above the postcard. Here we have an icon that represents an icon. Clicking the greyhound reveals a continuation of Alber's third person narrative, placing its users in intimate contact with Flora's thoughts as a solitary female traveler.

The third card, a beach scene, breaks the mold of the previous two. This card, from Seaside Heights, New Jersey, is filled with beachgoers. Alber's third person narrative does not appear. However, if the users roll their pointers over the card, a circular close-up of a portion of the scene emerges with text that accompanies the zoomed image. The text appears to be personal thoughts on the individual images within the scene, often questioning whether the traveler is lonely or solitary. The origin of the text is unresolved because there is no clarification of whose ruminations the users are reading. This card collapses the voices of Flora, the imagined subject, and Alber, the writer.

The fourth postcard plays with visual representations of presence and absence. This card, from the Rose Bud Café in Arkansas, depicts an empty diner. Here we are not offered Alber's third person narrative, nor are we sure whether the text is Flora's writing. This card is also distinct because music is replaced by sounds of chatting diners and clinking utensils. If we choose to move our pointer over the postcard, textual dialogue appears over the empty seats suggesting conversations between the café's customers. A portion of the conversations involves gossipy customers who wonder why Flora, an unmarried woman, would travel alone. A pair of customers in another portion of the card considers whether travel is a form of escape or a journey to self-discovery. Here Alber fills an empty space with imagined conversations and sound that serve to locate gender issues and ideas surrounding travel.

The fifth card marks the end of the journey for Flora, Alber, and the users. The postcard depicts an iconic cowboy with his back to the viewer, perhaps rolling a cigarette. The text above the card reads, "A West Cowboy, Rear View" and "Time to Roll His Own." The images and text here are quite ironic, for our journey through time, space, memory, and gender ends with a hypermasculine image of the lone cowboy. Like the previous card, there is text that appears if the pointer rolls over the postcard image. Unlike any of the previous cards, the text serves to decode the symbols on the card. One piece of text notes that the open sky in front of the cowboy implies freedom and mobility, while another describes his clothing as a symbol of self-reliance and individuality. Again, we are not sure whether these are Flora's actual words or Alber's. This ambiguity in narrative voice serves to comment on a distinct brand of an American travel narrative of freedom, mobility, individuality and possibility. Could the hypermasculine image of the cowboy imply that this type of philosophy is only available to men? Or could the image suggest that women are capable of obtaining the same ideals surrounding freedom and possibility? Our interpretation of the story is revised if we choose to visit Alber's time in 1999. She leaves her readers with three statements on freedom. Like the first postcard in the series, the images and our interpretations are never the one "true" meaning of the cards. As a work of interactive fiction, *Who is Flora?* does not intend to position one locus of meaning. Its subject cannot be authentically located, nor can we ever seek a complete narrative due to the way the story is presented as a series of text, images, sounds, and time. We can only accompany Flora and Alber as travelers through cyberspace, and perhaps, acquire our own interpretation of mobility, freedom, travel, memory, and gender. As Johnson notes, what is important about interactivity is the journey and experience.

D. Conclusions

Interactive fiction is illustrative of postmodern reading and interpretive practices. According to Turkle, the postmodern work cannot locate a singular authentic interpretation or identity because they are fluid and dynamic. Central to Alber's work is the fact that we can never be sure of who Flora really was. All we are able to extract from *Who is Flora?* is Alber's reconstruction of her through the real Flora's artifacts—her postcards. The way interactive fiction is structured also resists essentialized readings and interpretations. Unlike a book, the interactivity of *Who is Flora?* focuses on possibility, mobility, and freedom of choice for its users. Its images and voices appear, disappear, collapse, and interweave. Though the work does move from ambiguity in the first card, the work ends with a metacommentary. The fact that we are given three possibilities on mobility, freedom, travel, and time emphasizes that users can read the work in multiple ways and on multiple interpretative levels. Alber's statements on freedom and travel offer concrete ways to imagine the project as a cohesive work on interpretive choice.

4. Keywords and Key Concepts

1. **Computational Aesthetics**
2. **Simulation**
3. **User**
4. **Cyberspace**
5. **Transparency**

5. Works Cited and for Further Reading and Viewing

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 4. Saussure, Ferdinand de. "Nature of the Linguistic Sign." *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Ed. David H. Richter. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998. 832-834.

Film resources relating to women, cultural space, and social mobility:

Charlotte Grey (dir. Gillian Armstrong, Warner Brothers 2001)
Chocolat (dir. Lasse Hallström, Miramax, 2000)
Thelma and Louise (dir. Ridley Scott, MGM 1990)

6. More Interactive Fiction on the Web

<http://www.markamerika.com>
<http://www.grammatron.com>
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/poetry/ondisplay/index/shtml>
<http://www.altx.com/home.html>
<http://www.eastgate.com/ReadingRoom.html>

7. Discussion Questions

1. Consider whether *Who is Flora?* is operating on an aesthetic of transparency or an aesthetic of simulation. Does it deploy both types of aesthetics or neither?
2. Janet Murray finds that interactive works tend not to provide closure. In your opinion, does Alber's project make closure available? Where do you see the closed or open-ended interactivity in the work's form and content?
3. Steven Johnson notes "hypertext felt less like an exercise in literary democracy and more like an isolation booth." Is the user of *Who is Flora?* alone or solitary? Support your answer with specific references to the images, sounds, and text within and surrounding Flora's postcards.

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