

Eleanor Dare: January 2009 (Year 2).



Above, images from the *South* book and software.

Thesis overview and Bibliography

South, a Psychometric Text Adventure: Navigating Subjectivity.

Research Question:

How can notions of subjectivity be embedded into software writing that generates dynamic intra-active fictions?

Thesis overview: January 2009:

The thesis outlined in this overview will elucidate the research and practices I have pursued throughout my PhD in Art and Computational Technology. That practice has centred on the creation of a book called *South* and a set of accompanying software programs that have been designed to open up and

sustain a dynamic and ongoing relationship between the *South* book and its readers. The thesis will explain the development of the *South* project while also clarifying and situating my thesis question. I will explain how I undertook my work, why this work is relevant and original, and what results or conclusions have arisen from it. My thesis question is:

How can notions of subjectivity be embedded into software writing that generates dynamic intra-active fictions?

The thesis will outline in detail the theoretical and practical context of this question. It will examine the historical difficulty of defining subjectivity and the practical implications for subjectivity in relation to my own computational practices. I will also outline and explain the problems inherent in the concept of interactivity, clarifying the critical discourses that exist around this notion, and the intellectual and cultural context of these tensions.

This thesis will place story-generating systems within a historical and technical framework, and, (as it does with interactivity and subjectivity), locate areas of difficulty that my practice and research has sought to address. The thesis aims to justify the rationale behind my own approach to these problems. My methodology will be outlined and rationalised, identifying the pragmatic and theoretical problems I have encountered and how I have attempted to resolve them.

To conclude, the key results or deductions that have arisen from my research will be defined and interpreted. Where I have departed from previous practice I will explain how this occurred and why. I will examine further areas for

research and ways in which my project might be applied to other domains, such as educational tools for students or therapeutic software, in which the sense that a computer system has a subjective, longitudinal and situated knowledge of individuals might be beneficial.

Thesis structure in brief :

- **Abstract**
- **Chapter 1:** Introduction. This will identify my thesis question and its context. The introduction will outline the results of both my theoretical research and artistic practice. 5000 words or less.
- **Chapter 2:** literature review. A critical appraisal of my research materials. 15,000 words, plus 3500 for a separate review of my technical references.
- **Chapter 3:** Subjectivity, embodiment, interactivity, and situated knowledge. 11,000 words
- **Chapter 4:** Readers and writers, hypertext theories, pervasive games and site-specific art works. 10,000 words.
- **Chapter 5:** AI and writing, agents and *chatbots*. 8,000 words
- **Chapter 6:** Methodology and technical implementation. This will explain how my methodology relates to questions of knowledge production and situatedness. It will also look at critiques of top-down

systems, psychometric testing and agent architectures. 8,000 words, plus 3500 for the review of my technical references.

- **Chapter 7: Conclusion.** 3500 words.

- **Bibliography:** The bibliography will list all works referred to in my thesis.

Thesis structure in detail:

Chapter 1. Introduction:

The introduction to my thesis will clearly state and clarify my thesis question. My aim is to report the outcome of my practice, explaining what exactly I have produced. I will go into some detail about the context of my thesis question, my methodology and both the theoretical and material outcomes of my practice. I will briefly explain the goal of my project and establish the key problematic areas that will form the backbone of my research and of my original contribution. These areas are problems of epistemology, agency and subjectivity. The introduction will explain in brief how these problems relate to software architectures and notions of interactivity and agency.

I will conclude the introduction with a very brief description of the chapter contents, similar to the list above, entitled *Thesis Structure in Brief*.

Chapter 2. Literature Review:

The literature review forms a critically evaluative appraisal of my source materials. The review is organised thematically, each theme aims to clearly delineate the issues that my work addresses. These themes mirror those of my main chapters and are, in brief:

- Subjectivity, embodiment, interactivity, and situated knowledge.
- Readers and writers, hypertext theories, site-specific art works and pervasive games¹.
- Digital fiction systems and agent based works.
- Technical review: this covers the key works that have informed the technological aspects of my practical and theoretical research, in particular computational narrative systems.

The themed sections establish the key works in each field that are of relevance to my research and practice. This approach should make it clear how my work fits into the larger context of digital fiction systems and interactive programs, as well as to theoretical issues of epistemology and agency. My aim has been to illustrate the relevant historical and chronological

¹ 'Game academics have coined the term "pervasive games" to describe games that pervade into reality through e-mail correspondence, fake websites or location-based activities' Marek Bronstring, 26th December 2003, available at <http://www.adventuregamers.com/article/id,324>, accessed 03 June 2008.

developments of theories and practices for each area, summarizing the contribution of each work referenced. The literature review highlights the tensions and connections between the works and ideas cited, clarifying their direct relationship to my own thesis and practice.

The main body of my thesis:

The main body of my thesis will consist of the following three chapters,

- **Chapter 3.** Subjectivity, interactivity and embodiment.
- **Chapter 4.** Readers and writers, hypertext theories, pervasive games and site-specific art works.
- **Chapter 5.** Artificial Intelligence and writing, agent based narrative systems and *chatbots*.

These core chapters will establish a coherent narrative about my research and will follow on from each other with logic and clarity. As stated before, these chapters will illustrate in detail what I did, how I undertook my work, why this work is relevant and original, and what results or conclusions have arisen from it.

Chapter 3. Subjectivity, interactivity and embodiment:

South is a book and a computational system that appears to 'know' the individuals who read and engage with it, but how can a book or a software

system acquire any understanding of complex individuals? What are the problems inherent in this quest? This chapter will show how the *South* system has dealt practically and theoretically with notions of the subject and the subject's interaction with a computational system for generating personalised narrative experiences.

Subjectivity and interactivity are the two key areas that inform my research and practice. The theoretical discourses around subjectivity that I have researched identify many problematic aspects in relation to the very notion of a subject, subjectivity and the supposedly diametrical construction, objectivity. This chapter outlines these criticisms and shows how they relate to my practice. It shows how the notion of a unitary, rational and essentially disembodied subject has informed many of the assumptions embedded in software structures and notions of interactivity. This chapter explains and contextualizes alternative ideas such as those proposed by Elizabeth Grosz (1994), in relation to embodiment, and also Donna Haraway (1991), Lucy Suchman (1987, 2005, 2006) and Karen Barad in (2007) in relation to ideas about interactivity and new notions of agency. I show how these ideas relate to the design of my software, particularly in connection to my use of psychometric testing and situating data such as the Thames tide levels and CCTV images.

Chapter 4. Readers and writers, hypertext theories, pervasive games and site-specific art works:

Following on from the previous chapter, in which I outline discourses around the subject, interactivity and disembodiment, this chapter will explain how many of the ostensibly radical ideas about hypertext and interactive fiction (particularly those of the early to mid 1990s) have replicated errors of disembodiment and paradigms that reduce life to information structures. This chapter will look critically at early hypertext fiction theories including those of George Landow (1992) and Jay David Bolter (1991). This chapter will also ask what do we mean by *non-linear texts*? What is the difference between an author and a writer? I will refer to Espen Aarseth (1997) and Perron et al (2003), and to theories around the writer and the author, including Roland Barthes (1967), Michel Foucault (1977) and broader theories relating to readers and writers.

This chapter will investigate the tensions implicit in being both a writer of fiction and of fiction generating systems; what are the implications of this dual role? How do fiction-generating systems relate to games? My own system may, in some ways, be perceived as a game or a text adventure. The chapter will look at other artworks that have blurred the boundaries between games and fiction and between fiction and site-specific works, including the work of *Blast Theory (Can You See Me Now, 2001)*, and *pervasive, or augmented reality* games, games that bridge the gap between reality and fiction. I will argue that conventional notions of the site (and what it means to work with a specific location) share some of the problems outlined in relation to fixed

notions of the subject. I will explain and rationalise my response to this research and describe the outcomes in relation to the *South* project.

Chapter 5. Artificial Intelligence and Writing, Agents and *Chatbots*:

This chapter will elaborate upon the historical and intellectual context for fiction writing systems founded on artificial intelligence techniques. The chapter will go into some detail about intelligent agents and *chatbots*². I will explain how and why my system critically differs from previous works, and in what ways my goals might be different from those of earlier projects.

The chapter will ask what do the designers of agent architectures mean when they describe their agents as embodied and situated? (See Luck, Ashri, d’Inverno (2004) also Woolridge, Michael, 2002). Do they refer to the same epistemological frameworks described by Donna Harraway (1991), Lucy Suchman (1986, 2005, 2006) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994)? If not, how might I design a system that does incorporate radical notions of embodied and situated knowledge? This chapter will explain why I am committed to constructing such a system, expanding upon my theoretical, practical and ethical reasons for that commitment.

I will explain in detail the problematic issues connected to agent architectures, identified, for example, by Phoebe Sengers and Michael Mateas in (2003). The chapter will illustrate and discuss my attempt to

² *Chatbots* (also known as *talk bots*, *chatterbots* or *Artificial Conversational Entities* (ACE’s)) are computerised programs that attempt to simulate conversation. The most famous example of a chatbot is Joseph Weizenbaum’s ELIZA program (1966).

construct a system that is 'situated' and 'embodied'. In response to Phoebe Sengers' humanist critique of certain agent architectures as 'schizophrenic', I will suggest that a contingent and loosely rule-based system might be a more apposite model for embedding subjectivity into agent architectures. I will go into some detail about the creative aspects of constructing my own agent-based software.

Chapter 6. The project methodology and technical implementation:

Chapter six will explain and situate my project methodology; it will describe my approach to undertaking research, in particular, how and why my methodology is embedded with a commitment to highlighting partiality of perspective. Liz Stanley uses the term 'alienated knowledge' (Stanley, 1990:3) to describe a form of knowledge production that is not critically engaged with its own social and historical conditions of production. I will explain my own relationship to this notion and its impact upon and through my practice. This chapter will also draw upon the writings of Hollway (1989), Sullivan (2005), Bolt (2006) and Carter (2004). These writers address issues of reflexivity, epistemology and the relationship between arts practice and theory. I will show how and why my own methodology has evolved and mention art works and practices that have been influential, (though not without their own critical tensions) such as Augusto Boal's *Theatre of The oppressed* (1973), and Dunne, Gaver and Pacenti's (1999) *Cultural Probes*, as useful examples of (respectively) participatory drama and practice based research methodologies from non-computational domains.

This chapter will also explain the technical structures of my software, illuminating (where useful), how my code works and the rationale for the programs I have written. The chapter will flow thematically from all previous chapters in outlining my approach to psychometric testing and subjectivity, and why I have focused particularly upon aspects of multi-agent architecture and collective or situated sources of intelligence in addressing those areas. I will outline my response to the limits of top-down, centralist systems; I will also illustrate how I have attempted to address the rigid notions of subject-object boundaries that are embedded in almost all interactive systems. The chapter will explore the implications of what Paul Carter (2004) has called *material-thinking*; as I understand it, this means the generation of knowledge through practice, which Barbara Bolt describes as ‘a particular understanding that is realized through our dealings with the tools and materials of production’³ (Bolt, 2006). I will explore how and why this still represents a radical form of knowledge production (and methodology) within the wider context of the Western academy. I will also outline the challenges I have faced in undertaking research through my own practice.

Chapter 7. Conclusion:

This short chapter (approximately 3500 words) will summarize my results and their implications. It will also explore further areas in which my research might flow and wider applications for a subject oriented and situated software

³ Bolt, B. (2006) *Materializing pedagogies. Working Papers in Art and Design 4*
Retrieved <03/01/09> from URL
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research/papers/wpades/vol4/bbfull.html>

model; as mentioned, this might include a brief discussion of ways in which my project might be applied to other areas, including games, learning tools and therapeutic software.

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