Open to Construction: reading and writing bodies in digital fiction and the open web platform

Christine Wilks, Astrid Ensslin, Carla Rice, Sarah Riley, Megan Perram, Hannah Fowlie, Lauren Munro and Aly Bailey

Drawing parallels between the open web platform and the open way a fictional body can be constructed from a text, this paper explores the creative and ethical strategies employed in the creation of a feminist interactive digital fiction for body image narrative therapy, advocacy and plurality by the *Writing New Bodies* project. Following a period of feminist participatory action research, the results of which have been published in the electronic book review (Ensslin et al. 2020), we are now at production stage and Christine Wilks is currently developing the digital fiction, co-designed for a new form of interactive, body-non-specific bibliotherapy.

Background & the participant research

Body image concerns affect the well-being of a generation who are coming of age immersed in digital culture. This is particularly true for young women and non-binary individuals of diverse backgrounds who regularly confront appearance-related pressures. Furthermore, the neoliberal dictates of postfeminism have pitted women in competition with one another, creating a culture of distrust and division between the more and less privileged sides of the postfeminist divide (Milne 2018; Rice 2014; Gill 2007). The latter include women of colour, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, women with disabilities, queer women, non-binary, woman-identifying individuals, and any intersectional combinations they may represent. In short, women's bodies remain "a function of the social world's inscriptions" (Jennifer Scappettone 2007: 182; see Elizabeth Grosz). This effect is augmented by our hypervisual, AI-infused, social and mobile media culture that privileges unrealistic 'ideal', tall, thin, heteronormative, white, 'able-'bodies in young women and inadvertently leads to poor self-esteem, anxiety, overexercising, eating disorders and/or worse (Hogue and Mills 2018 etc).

Writing New Bodies is an intercontinental project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC IG 435-2018-1036; see Ensslin et al. 2020). It brings together a team of transdisciplinary researchers in theories of gender and the body, critical psychology, art and social justice, digital media arts, electronic literature, narrative, and digital culture. Our goal is to critically co-design and evaluate an interactive web app for body image narrative therapy with and for our target group of women and non-binary individuals, aged 18-25, from diverse intersectional backgrounds.

In order to create media art and literature that fosters self-compassion and positive body-image in our target audience, a considerate, balanced and participant-informed approach is needed that takes into account the complex, multi-dimensional nature of affect in narrative media interaction. Equally importantly, it needs to follow the principles of inclusive design (Clarkson et al. 2003), which encourages equitable access - both materially (in terms of accessible technologies and platforms) and psychologically (pertaining to users' ability to self-project and relate to media content in egalitarian ways).

Methodologically, we are using a combination of Feminist Participatory Action Research and Critical Community Co-Design. FPAR is a participatory and action-oriented conceptual and methodological framework that centers gendered power dynamics and women's experiences both theoretically and practically, aiming to empower woman-identified individuals in a variety of ways. It enables a critical understanding of multiple, intersectional perspectives. It works toward inclusion and social change through participatory processes while exposing researchers' own biases and assumptions. Importantly, researchers and participants learn from each other through iterations of critical reflection and re-design.

In spring 2019 we held four workshops in three Canadian locations, with a total of 21 participants. They engaged in a range of communicative activities, such as reflective dialog, and free, auto-narrative writing (sometimes using third person to talk about themselves at a narrative distance). Participants played digital body fictions made by Wilks, as well as a range of Twine[1] fictions, to get a feel for the software and its storytelling options. They also wrote their own Twine stories as a form of interventionist self-disclosure and as a hypertextual exploration of options

[1] Twine is an open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories - https://twinery.org/

they may not usually consciously consider as part of imagining their bodies and the decisions they make about their embodied lives (we tested this therapeutic use of Twine in one of our pilot studies, and it worked well for individual auto-narration - see Ensslin et al., 2016). What turned out to be a key element of the workshops was the fact that Wilks was present throughout and engaged with participants as artist, co-facilitator, and software instructor. Her experience of working with our participants turned out to be key to her ability to develop a co-designed digital fiction.

From participant research to creative implementation

The participants raised a multitude of issues and themes that could, potentially, be pursued in a digital fiction. Building on the information provided by participants, the research team made connections within and across research sites through the coding of the participant data, which included the transcribed audio recordings of discussions and the participants' writings. In an attempt to transmute the resulting diverse and manifold richness into a usable form for a digital fiction, Wilks mapped the concerns and themes identified onto various feminist theories to see if a configuration emerged that would lend itself to interactive storytelling. As a structuring guide, she found Sandra Bartky's three categories of disciplinary practice particularly useful: body size and shape; movement, gesture and posture; and the body as ornamented surface. Following Foucault, Bartky argues that these disciplinary practices produce “docile bodies” that are recognizably feminine through the process of internalizing norms (1988). Judith Butler's notion of performing gender identity (1997) also resonated with the participant data. In terms of narrative content and the therapeutic brief, she looked for guidance from evidence-based body image therapy methodologies (Cash, 2008; Grogan, 2016; O’Connor et al. 2017; Orbach, 2019; Kite and Kite, 2020). Nevertheless, the participants' own stories and memories offered the most fertile ground for the creative fiction-making process. The coded transcriptions of the workshop discussions provide valuable corroborating and amplifying support.

One thing was clear, the participants wanted to resist the pressures of our hyper-visual culture, which contributes to so much body dissatisfaction. Collectively, we decided to avoid graphic, mimetic representations of the body. Therefore, there is no avatar, the digital fiction is text-based but full of bodies constructed textually by

the reader-player from the dynamic onscreen lexia.

Narratives that require characters and short form narratives often work best with only one protagonist. We had hoped that an idea of the main characters would surface during the participant workshops but they offered such a vibrant mix of voices, memories and stories that Wilks, regarding character as a representation of viewpoint, came away pondering how to distill all these different points of view into a single protagonist. Her first impulse was to propose a world of (four) stories, each with a different body image theme. However, when she began working on what was to be the first story, on the theme of body size and shape, more characters emerged who began to interject with their own stories or viewpoints. Rather than stick to her initial plan, Wilks allowed these stories to fold into and expand the main story. Later, it struck her that this change was apposite because, in many ways, it mirrored the social experience of the participant workshops.

Characters & the interactive narrative

The protagonist of the digital fiction, Jordan, has body image issues relating to her size and shape, which become evident from her negative self-talk. The interactive narrative traces Jordan's daily life - working, eating, commuting, interacting with social media, socializing with friends, spending solitary time at home - a cycle that repeats with variations. Throughout, Jordan struggles with competing internal and external voices, influencing how she behaves, thinks and feels. During a key scene at a house party with a group of friends, a mirror shatters and Jordan (erroneously) feels responsible. The incident stimulates a collective sharing of body-image-related observations, memories and feelings as the friends pick up the pieces. These story fragments, speculations and arguments, that pierce, bespeckle, extend and complicate the main narrative (not least because of the effect they have on Jordan), were inspired by the personal stories and experiences shared during the participant workshops. However, being fiction, Wilks inserted some other, more polarised, voices and POVs for dramatic (and therapeutic) purposes. This assemblage dramatizes the affective network of kinship of the participant workshops and, because the narrative is interactive and choice-based, the network incorporates the reader-player in a concrete way.

Dramatize is the operative word because, although text-based, there is no (global) narrator, no single highest level speech position from which the whole narrative discourse originates. All of the characters speak for themselves, like actors in a play. In the case of the protagonist, her interior dialogue of conflicting hyper-critical and more supportive voices (e.g. her Inner Critic and Inner Ally) is also dramatized. Thus Jordan becomes “a posthuman collectivity, an ‘I’ transformed into the ‘we’ of autonomous agents operating together to make a self” (Hayles, 1999, p. 6) and, crucially, one of these agents is the reader-player. As an interactive protagonist, Jordan is the character or point of view that the reader plays by making meaningful choices on her behalf that, in a diegetic feedback loop, can affect her body image, raising or lowering her levels of body dissatisfaction. This, in turn, affects narrative progress. At these decision moments, the digital fictional character and the engaged reader-player become one. For the purposes of this paper, we will call this blended or entangled posthuman entity, the *reader-playing-as-Jordan*. Situating the reader-player in the mind of the protagonist, may lead to enhanced empathic identification and agency and, therefore, a more profoundly immersive (and potentially transformative) experience. This process of “diegetic enactment” (Wilks 2020) is where we postulate the therapeutic value lies via an extradiegetic feedback loop which may induce the reader-player to reflect upon, and perhaps subtly alter, their own body image.

For instance, discussing non-interactive print fiction, Zunshine (2006) argues:

> The cognitive rewards of reading fiction might thus be aligned with the cognitive rewards of pretend play through a shared capacity to stimulate and develop the imagination. It may mean that our enjoyment of fiction is predicated--at least in part--upon our awareness of our "trying on" mental states potentially available to us but at a given moment differing from our own. (loc. 327)

If this is the case, it follows that the cognitive rewards may be even more powerful in an interactive fiction that engages the reader-player in diegetic enactment, a more active form of pretend play. The *reader-playing-as-Jordan* is not only 'trying on' mental states but also 'trying on' various decision-making processes and exploring their consequences for (further) mental states involving body image. In the absence of a narrator, there is no higher authority to depend on or defer to, the reader-player must rely on their own interpretive powers and use their own

judgement. Furthermore, some of the decision-making is also about taking action in the world, such as engaging in feminist social activism, so the effect of 'trying on' could be beneficial or enlightening (for want of a better word) in multiple ways. As a branching narrative with a cyclic structure there is no win-lose end state in our digital fiction, there are simply different consequences for different inclinations. If they choose to cycle through other/more days in the life of the protagonist, the *reader-playing-as-Jordan* may 'try on' the effects of different choices.

Narrative therapeutic benefits

The literature on body image problems and body dysmorphic disorders indicate that cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) approaches are amongst the most successful therapies (Grogan, 2016; O'Connor et al. 2017). These involve some form of questioning and challenging habitual thoughts or thinking patterns. In a text-based interactive narrative with a therapeutic remit, where the reader-player has direct access to the mind of the protagonist and some power to literally change her mind, a CBT-inspired storytelling approach would seem to be a good fit. Afterall, as Palmer argues, "narrative fiction is, in essence, the presentation of fictional mental functioning" (2004, loc. 98). So, Wilks has taken CBT into account in both the form and content of the narrative interaction. For example, Jordan experiments with Mirror Exposure Therapy (a form of CBT). This was directly inspired by the many references to mirrors in the participant data and one particular participant, who wrote positively about their mirror exposure experience. However, because CBT focuses on thought, it can reinforce the mind-body split, which we want to avoid. Nor do we want to reduce the widespread problem of body dissatisfaction and the responsibility for 'fixing' it to the individualised level. Hopefully, the intersectional cast of characters, who from time to time engage in discussion around the broader societal issues and offer casual or more politicized critiques of the effects of neo-liberal consumerism, will contextualise and expand the individual mind-centred drama.

The narrative's cast of characters express a range of different experiences, perceptions, thoughts and feelings about their bodies and the world they live in. To a lesser or greater degree, all struggle or have struggled with body dissatisfaction. Some characters' preoccupations, beliefs and attitudes tend to have detrimental effects on body image, whilst others have healing or protective effects. For

example, some characters are ardent feminists and "[r]esearch has shown that women who hold feminist attitudes to body image are more satisfied than those who do not identify with feminist values" (Grogan, 2017, p. 189). The interplay of Jordan's inner voices, her interactions with other characters and, on occasions, with intrusive fictional marketing messages challenge the *reader-playing-as-Jordan* in positive and negative ways. How normative or how empowering and liberating their effect depends on the choices the *reader-playing-as-Jordan* makes. The nature of the choices offered throughout the narrative include, not only decisions about what to do but also, different ways they may choose to think or feel about the matter at hand. In other words, many of the interactive choices woven through the narrative dramatize situations and enact processes influenced by CBT methods. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the underlying ludonarrative program tracks the tendencies of the *reader-playing-as-Jordan* towards more normative or more liberating and empowering choices, and this affects the course they take through the branching narrative.

Ludonarrative design and the docile body

The digital fiction is text-based but its visual language is equally important. Jordan, the protagonist, is represented by an abstract curvilinear freeform shape, which Wilks calls an 'organic' (when writing digitally, it is crucial to name entities so that they can be addressed in/by code). Animation brings the organic to life, suggesting some kind of embodied subjectivity, behaviour, bodily characteristics and/or emotional responses. Abstraction leaves the organic open to interpretation and its signification fluid.

Foucault's concept of the state's disciplinary power, which, through constant surveillance and normalizing judgement, produces 'docile bodies', has directly influenced Wilks' ludonarrative design. Specifically, an algorithm based on a dynamic 'docility value' affects the morphing appearance and behaviour of the organic. The higher the docility value, the more the organic conforms to a standard symmetrical shape and its motion restricted by a restraining visible geometry. The lower the docility value, the more freeform is the shape, the more liberated its movement and the weaker the restricting geometry. The docility value is affected by programmed narrative events and, crucially, the choices the reader-player makes, who, in a feedback loop, is affected by visible changes in the organic. Furthermore,

the reader-player's choices contribute to an aggregate 'Docile-Body-Bearing' value which helps steer a course through the cyclic structure of the non-linear narrative.

This docility-based algorithm is a neat way of designing a ludonarrative/playable narrative, it seems fitting, but, at the same time, we are uneasy about the rule of a bipolar numerical value. This inherent contradiction is an interesting analogy for the very issues our project aims to address. As our participants intimated, we want to resist normalization but recognise that we cannot completely escape it. We must find ways of being in the world as it is, whilst also finding ways of making changes in the world. However, we envisage that the power of narrative will have a far stronger effect than an underlying algorithm, which, afterall, only assists in steering the narrative, it doesn't determine the narrative content. The richness, complexity, ambiguity and nuance of storytelling born out of the lived experiences of our research participants will override a reductive binary system, rendering the digital binary an ancillary rather than dominant element in our interactive narrative for bibliotherapy.

The principle of minimal departure

If, as Possible Worlds narrative theory posits, the real world serves as a model for the mental construction of textual fictional storyworlds, it follows that our experience and knowledge of real bodies, including our own bodies, serve as a model for the mental construction of textual fictional bodies. Unless a text draws attention to the physical appearance of a fictional character, the reader will tend to assume, according to Ryan's “principle of minimal departure” (1991), that their body conforms to a familiar or generic norm (two eyes, two arms, two legs, etc.). Potentially, due to the empathic identification induced through diegetic enactment, the reader-player's own body model may fluidly interleave, superimpose or merge with their mental construction of the protagonist’s body as they become the *reader-playing-as-Jordan*. Since there is no narratorial voice to authoritatively describe Jordan's body and it is never depicted in mimetic visual form, how the reader-player constructs Jordan's body is open to interpretation, open to (re)construction. Jordan's negative self-talk describes her as fat, flabby and repulsive, but is that true in the textual actual world or is it a distortion of her body image[2]? The reader-player

[2] This is not to suggest that body dissatisfaction can be reduced to a simplistic binary of external reality vs. internal distortion of reality.

may decide that Jordan's Inner Critic is not a reliable source of the textual actual truth about her body and mentally construct her differently, perhaps, if they identify strongly with her body image issues, empathically shaping her in their own self-image. But what happens if they do not identify strongly with Jordan's particular body image issues? Since there is no mimetic visual nor authoritative objective description to fix the reader-player's mental image, the *reader-playing-as-Jordan* may construct a shape-shifting body, drawn from a pooling or mingling of their knowledge and experience of other bodies, which may include (if not default to) normative concepts of the hegemonic standard body (white, middle-class, able-bodied).

However, during the course of the narrative, the reader-player may decide that what Jordan's body looks like is less important than how she thinks and feels and behaves in her body. Or that she is “more than a body” (Kite and Kite, 2021). This is the narrative's aim and its openness is a deliberate strategy to make the bibliotherapeutic benefits and socio-political commitments of the work as fluid and widely accessible as possible. We will not know if the strategy is successful until we get feedback from reader-players but, when creating an interactive narrative for bibliotherapy, it is necessary to hypothesize how the *reader-playing-as-Jordan* may become embodied in the liminality between storyworld and 'real' world because such considerations affect the narrative and ludonarrative design.

Openness & accessibility

In a work that prioritises inclusive design and equitable access on both the psychological and material level, another primary concern is the accessibility of the technological medium and platform of delivery/distribution. According to the World Wide Web Foundation, the web is "a global public good and a basic right" (2021, para. 2). It is built on open standards developed and maintained by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), whose mission is to make the benefits of the web "available to all people, whatever their hardware, software, network infrastructure, native language, culture, geographical location, or physical or mental ability" (2021, para. 4). These aims are compatible with those of our project (although our remit is narrower, the digital fiction springs from a specific cultural background and we don't have the resources to offer it in multiple languages). Therefore, with accessibility in mind, and because our participants told us they preferred using

smartphones and tablets, we chose to build the digital fiction on and for the open web platform using a mobile-first, responsive web design approach for the greatest reach. The aim is to provide a good user experience at all screen sizes and combinations of hardware and network capabilities, starting with small screens and adding enhancements that further enrich the user experience as the screen size and/or technological capabilities increase. Equally important, the digital fiction web app complies with ARIA[3] standards to make it more accessible to people with a diverse range of abilities and disabilities.

Open access is an important, guiding principle for our project but it also resonates with our aims and the content and nature of the creative work on a deeper level. In recent years, there has been increasing anxiety about the openness of the web being "under attack" (Mozilla, 2019, para. 1; also see Treviranus, 2018; Surman, 2018). For example, Behrenshausen worries about a "future without an open Web... in which people are... beholden to those with the power to determine what everyone reads, studies, watches, and says... It's a future in which people can't engage in basic interactions without first releasing details about their identities to multiple stakeholders capable of tracking their activities and tailoring their potential views of the world" (2018, para. 16). Compare this with Bartky's discussion of Foucault's notion of bodies subjected to disciplinary practices: "This production of 'docile bodies' requires that an uninterrupted coercion be directed to the very processes of bodily activity, not just their result; this 'microphysics of power' fragments and partitions the body's time, its space, and its movements." (Bartky, 1988, p.130). The latter could be equally apt as a description of the subtly coercive effects of social media platforms, which Behrenshausen describes as "'walled gardens': beautifully manicured and maintained (but nevertheless cordoned and closed) environments" (2018, para. 12), which, in turn, brings to mind the grooming regimens and behaviour precepts that aim to produce 'docile' feminine bodies. It is no surprise, then, that the big tech platforms that want to lock us in to proprietary systems are amongst the most prolific purveyors of imagery and messaging that contribute to body dissatisfaction in young people (Aparicio-Martinez et al. 2019; de Vries et al. 2019). Whilst it is important to challenge and resist oppressive messaging from within the social media platforms, it is also important to resist their dominance and control by offering content on and encouraging use of the open web.

[3] Accessible Rich Internet Applications (see MDN Contributors, 2021).

Concluding thoughts

Both the refusal to visually represent a (female-gendered or sexed-coded) body in a digital fiction and the refusal to use proprietary closed platforms, therefore, represent a form of resistance to the normative forces of cultural hegemony within neoliberalism. In this context, choosing the open web platform is a feminist strategy that pragmatically and aesthetically underpins the concerns of our digital fiction, where the body is relatively open to (re)construction rather than defined and limited by the restrictive norms and unattainable ideals commonly found in digital media representations of bodies.

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