

DIGITAL FICTION CURIOS

Clearance: Analysis

Professor Alice Bell, Sheffield Hallam University

Work created by Andy Campbell and Judi Alston, Flash, 2007

www.dreamingmethods.com/clearance

Clearance plays with us. It plays with the boundary between reality and illusion and it plays with the distinction between fiction and fact. Using film, animation, sound, and interactivity it builds an unnerving fictional world in which we are unsure as to what is fictionally real and what is only imagined by the protagonist.

Readers are introduced to the fictional world of Clearance via an opening screen on which information is generated from an unspecified government digital database about an individual called Iggy Hayer. The database reveals that Iggy was born in South Africa in 1968 and that he emigrated to the UK in 1980. He has no children and his wife died in 2007 (which is notably the year of Clearance's publication). Security details also reveal that Iggy is a political activist who has served some time in prison for civil disobedience. Additional medical details show that while Iggy has good physical health, he has experienced early childhood trauma of some kind, that he has disturbed sleep, and that he takes prescribed medication. An additional window displays a video of a man standing on a countryside pathway whose face is initially obscured via a hood and a strong light. As the camera moves towards him, his face is shown to be covered with a stone mask. The silence is then broken as music plays in the background and the screen displays a car journey down a British country lane from a first-person perspective. It is as though we, as readers, are sitting in the passenger seat of the car before the image is subsequently scrambled. A British countryside scene is then overlaid in parts with fragments of text and occasionally accompanied by sound. The landscape looks desolate. While we can see a rural setting, objects such as a rubbish bins and piles of waste give a sense of deprivation and neglect or else abandonment.

Readers explore the fictional world using the mouse, panning around the vista and clicking on hyperlinks that invite us to come 'this way'. We cannot see our avatar but, in terms of navigation, when the reader moves the mouse the screen pans accordingly. The reader is therefore able to determine their own visual point of view. The reader's exploratory function means that she/he is given partial responsibility for the visual perspective but that visual perspective is also partially presented from Iggy's point of view or else via some equipment he might be using. This is because visuals are sometimes distorted as though a transmission is being interrupted and the background sound is a dull rumbling interspersed with crackles which get louder and softer intermittently. Occasionally we hear the sound of fighter jets flying overhead and a voiceover with an American

accent warns of an impending military attack. Audio recordings taken from news broadcasts and speeches, warn that 'everything you have been told about ... what was going on was a total lie,' and that 'they can see everything and hear everything'. Thus many of the messages we experience are connected to surveillance and suggest a point of view from someone in psychological distress. Much of Iggy's first person narrative, often directed at an unnamed addressee, appears to be paranoid: 'I've been seeing new things since you disappeared', he claims. Shaky-camera work provides an amateur feel to the filmic elements. Visual and verbal elements thus combine to create an internal point of view that allows the reader them to see the fictional world through both Iggy's and their own eyes and this creates a dual visual and psychological perspective. However, throughout, we are unsure as to whether the verbal accounts and the visual perspective given in the text represent the reality of the fictional world or whether they are Iggy's delusions and thus his private, interior world only. Some images also appear to depict Iggy's memories. An aesthetically grainy scene of young children playing on their retro-style bicycles is superimposed onto the countryside and suggests a by-gone era rather than the present day that the rest of the narrative depicts. It implies that we are sharing Iggy's current point of view with some of his memories.



We never see Iggy either as an individual or as interacting with others. However, because we are told about Iggy's personal life, mental health, political activity, and criminal record at the very beginning of the narrative, we are primed with information about him that might well affect our interpretation of the scenes that follow. In addition, we also know what data is being kept about him and thus what information is apparently relevant for a particular government agency. The penultimate scene of the fiction shows Iggy's file being deleted from the database, suggesting that

someone in addition to ourselves has been observing Iggy's behaviour and that either he is no longer a person of interest or that the government no longer wishes to be seen to be tracking him.

While the majority of the narrative serves to problematise the reality of the fictional world, the ending of *Clearance* provides a significant revelation. Throughout the fiction, large stone carvings in the shape of human heads appear as though scattered throughout the rural landscape. They look incongruous and anachronous because their ancient style conflicts with the modern temporal setting of the rest of the narrative. We assume therefore that the stone heads are a product of Iggy's distorted view of the world; that they are hallucinations or false-memories along with the other constructions of the world that we can categorize as paranoid. At the end of the text, the reader is automatically directed via an external hyperlink to a Sky News webpage which reports that twelve "mystery stone sculptures have turned up outside a number of properties in Yorkshire - but no-one knows why or where they have come from".



As readers, we might try to discern whether this is an authentic Sky News website or whether it is a fake version created specifically for *Clearance*. In fact, the Sky News article is real. However, because the article refers to the stone heads that we see also in the fictional world of *Clearance*, the content of the article is retrospectively applied to the fictional world. The implication is that if the stone heads are not a delusion, then perhaps the rest of Iggy's account also has some truth to it. The external link - a feature of web-based digital fiction specifically - is used to reframe the status of some elements in the narrative: what we might initially conclude to be a non-actual state of affairs in the form of paranoid delusions ultimately materializes to be based on truth. As a further nod to

the way in which Clearance combines fiction and reality, authorship of the text is attributed to Andy Campbell, Judi Alston, and Billy Johnson. Further exploration of the stone heads reveals that an artist, Billy Johnson, was responsible for distributing the stones around Yorkshire. Thus, the fictional world is based on a real world event and inspiration for Clearance is attributed directly to the source by the authors. This revelatory ending means that Clearance moves from being a purely fictional narrative to a fictionalized and embellished account of a real world event. It is a fictional text based on factual events.

Thematically, Clearance foregrounds the nature of surveillance. While the post-apocalyptic scenario depicted in the text presents a near future possibility that is not yet realised in the real world, we do, like Iggy, live in a world in which we are under some degree of scrutiny. Once Iggy's apparent visual delusions of stone heads are shown as being based on reality, therefore, we question what else in Iggy's narrative can be reframed in the same way. The status of database with intricate details of citizens' lives, the surveillance voices, the sounds of military attacks, are all problematised. The game that is played at the end of Clearance can occur in other media; a print novel may end with a declaration that what we thought were purely fictional events are actually based on historical happenings. However, the link to independently published material that exists beyond the boundary of the Clearance website, and of whose truth status we might not be immediately sure, is unique to fiction published on the web. It shows the ways in which digital technology and authors of digital works can play with fictionality, our sense of reality, and therefore ultimately with us.

You can read about the way in which Clearance and other digital fictions play with the distinction between fiction and reality in: Alice Bell (2019). "Digital fictionality: possible worlds theory, ontology, and hyperlinks" in Bell, Alice and Ryan, Marie-Laure, (eds.) Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology. Frontiers of narrative series. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 249-71.