Inside – A Journal of Dreams: Analysis

Professor Alice Bell, Sheffield Hallam University

Work created by Andy Campbell and Judi Alston, Flash, 2000
www.dreamingmethods.com/inside/

Inside: A Journal of Dream is a piece of digital fiction that engages with the physicality of the book and uses the affordances of digital media to represent the immaterial nature of dreams and memory.

Inside presents the reader with a journal that documents two related narratives. In one, displayed using the Times New Roman font, the narrator describes his daytime experiences and in the other, using Courier New, the narrator documents his increasingly intense dreams. From the daytime entries, we infer that the unnamed narrator is suffering carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty gas fire that an engineer fails to fix. The dream sequences, on the other hand, imply that the narrator is suffering emotional pain as he often documents scenes of powerlessness or feelings of inertia as well as the apparent mourning of a nameless 'her'.

Both narratives are displayed via a faithful 3D rendering of what appears to be a robust and heavy leather-bound journal which the reader can physically interact with using the computer's mouse. As with a physical book, we can turn the pages of the journal sequentially or we can flick through pages to search for a particular page number or choose a page at random. We can select from a number of options on the left of the screen which allow us to zoom in or out of the journal, to rotate the journal to read text that is written sideways on, and to inverse it to read text that is written backwards. We can also move some objects within the journal around - for example, we can reach into the book to move a Polaroid photograph.
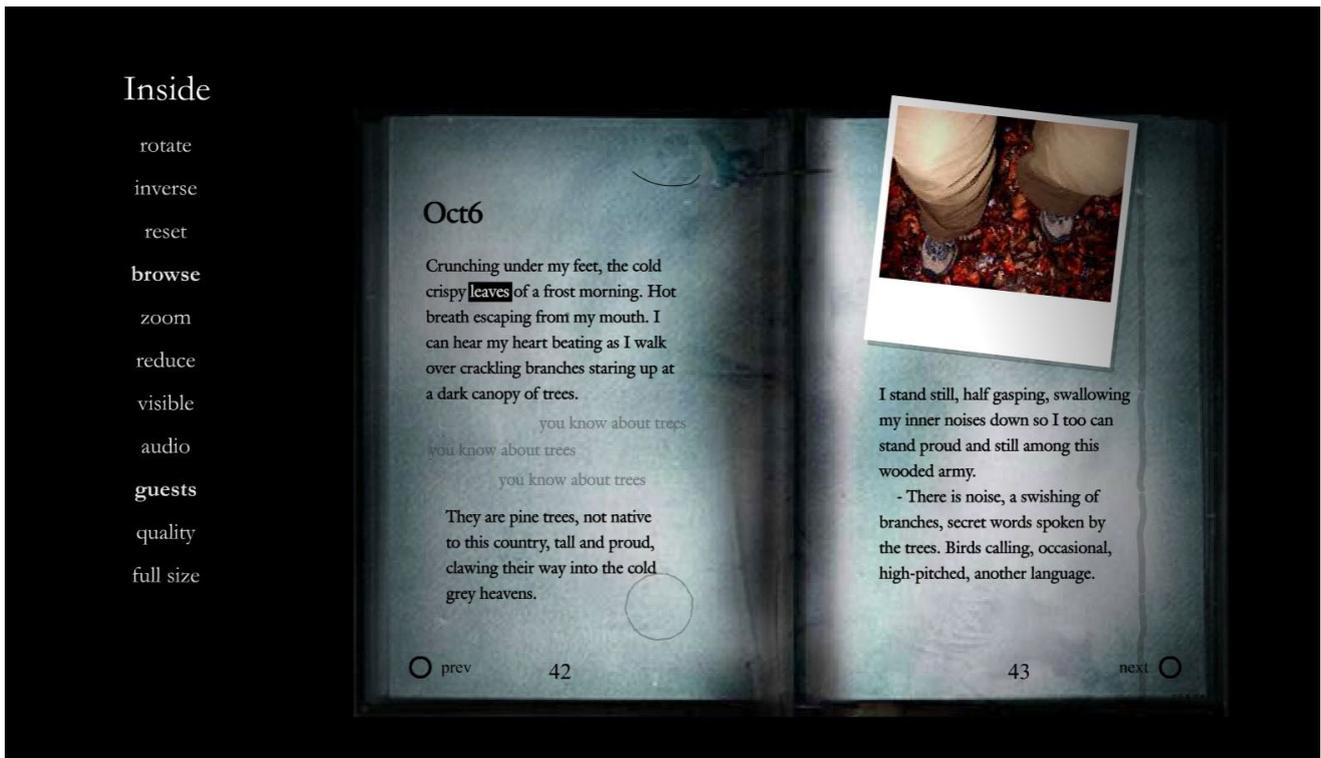
As the narrative progresses, we get far fewer accounts of the narrator's daytime experiences and more accounts of his dreams as we infer that the carbon monoxide is taking hold and he is slipping into confusion and prolonged periods of unconsciousness. The dreams are reported using both the past and present tense with the present tense entries creating as sense of immediacy and urgency. As time passes, some dream entries are written using capital letters which creates a further sense of anxiety or alarm. Text becomes fragmented and words appear in different sizes. Mark-making increasingly appears on some of the pages, as though someone has annotated the text but we're not sure who. Typography and textuality are therefore extremely important in terms of creating a visual sense of the two different kinds of narrative. The digital rendering of the journal is also absolutely central to the reader's impression of and relationship with the narrator and his narrative(s) because by providing an object from the fictional world for them to materially interact with, the reader is allotted an investigative role in which they must decipher what has happened to this nameless, vulnerable individual.

That Inside uses a printed book as the channel for storytelling is significant because it foregrounds both the materiality and the limitations of print.

We can see Inside as an early, digital example of what Jessica Pressman (2018) calls "bookishness" which she defines as 'a trend in novels published since 2000 … [that] exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies". She notes that bookishness occurs in print in novels such as Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves (2000) and Steven Hall's The Raw Shark Texts (2007) which are print fictions that incorporate typographical experimentation. However, she acknowledges that bookishness can also occur in digital fiction, noting that some 'born-digital works exploit the aesthetic of bookishness by adapting the appearance of paper and translating the print-based

reading practices onto the screen'. As we have seen, Inside very much exploits the 'aesthetic of bookishness' by allowing readers to handle a digital rendering of a book - an old book at that - via the digital interface and the interactive tools that this facilitates.

click to awaken

Yet while Inside certainly draws on the characteristics of a printed artefact, it also utilises features that can only be generated using digital media. Readers can interact with moving letters and words, shifting them around the page using the mouse. In some diary entries words become bigger so that they appear as fragments of language; in other entries background images come to the foreground and partially conceal the text. The visual intrusions partly obscure some of the narrative as though traces of memories are impinging on the narrator's current thoughts. Exploiting the hypertextual capability of digital media, readers can also clink on hyperlinks that take them out of the pages of the journal to visual representations of what the narrator describes. In these cases, 3D objects float in space, creating an otherworldly form of representation. Digital features are therefore used in Inside to link the materiality of the digitally-rendered text to the content of the narrative itself by suggesting that memories or other mental images are intruding on the present moment. However, these visual, kinetic features are also elements that do not and cannot exist in print. As such, while the focus of Inside is a print journal, it is digital technology that provides immediacy for this piece.

Published in 2000 - right at the start of the period that Pressman suggests bookishness began - Inside represents a very early and therefore extremely innovative example of "bookishness" in digital fiction. However, it also combines bookishness with digital technology to produce a work that speaks both to the ephemeral nature of dreams and the apparent permanence of print. What is significant here though is that while print technology can preserve the narrator's verbal account of both his wakeful and his dream experiences, it is digital technology that offers a truly multimodal and therefore authentic sense of what the narrator has experienced, combining text with still and

moving images, sound effects, and some hypertext structuring. What the digital medium provides therefore is a means of representing the narrator's slippage from lucidity into unconsciousness as though this were happening before our eyes in real time. Not only do the digital features generate an increasingly dreamy if not hallucinogenic sense of reality but they also allow the reader to experience the narrator's exterior and interior worlds with him.
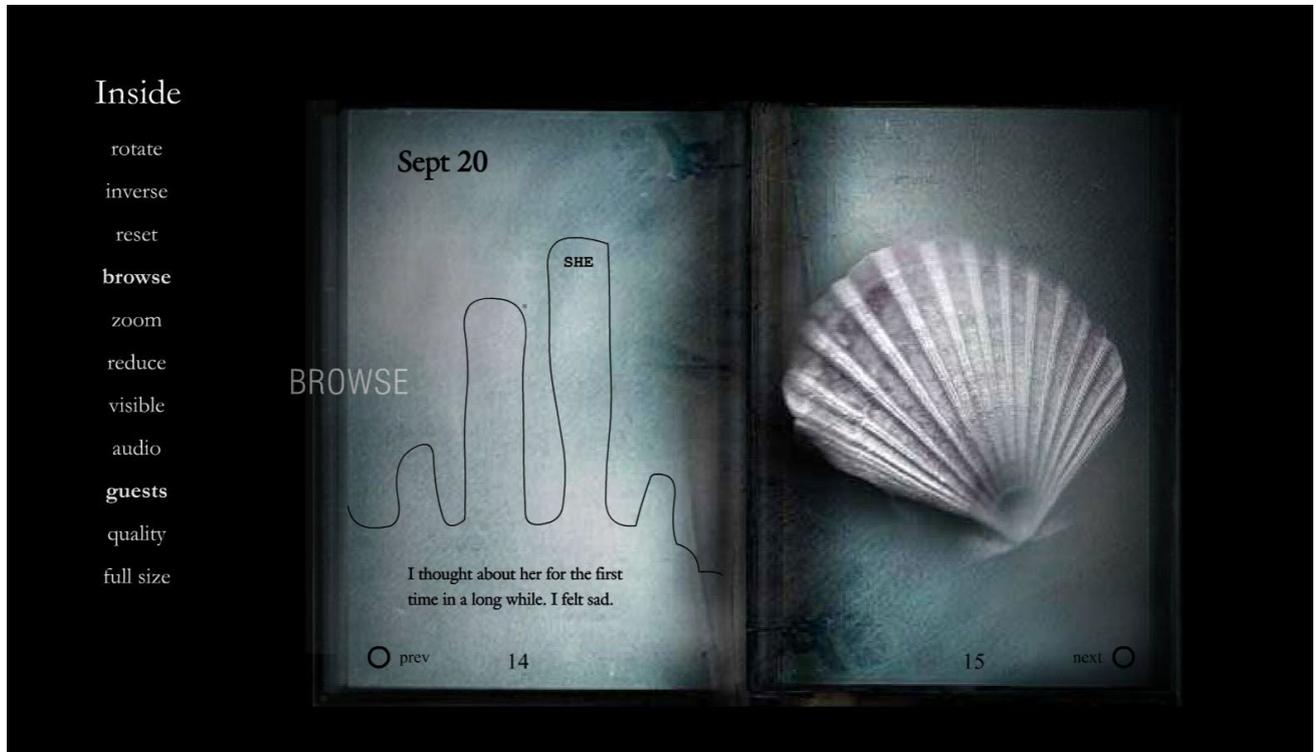
Inside allows us to see the relationship between reality and dreams, between print and digital, and also between telling and showing. Just as the narrator's memories take on an increasingly visual and unstructured grammar so too does the digital fiction with readers ultimately experiencing a beautifully amorphous world.

You can read more about the way that digital media can be used to creates different kinds of stories in Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad (eds.) (2014). *Analyzing Digital Fiction*. **Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Stylistics. New York, Routledge.**