DIGITAL FICTION
CURIOS

The Flat: Analysis
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Work created by Andy Campbell, Flash, 2006
www.dreamingmethods.com/theflat/

Reading *The Flat* is a stressful experience. A timer ticks, lights flicker, text disappears, and something growls. Despite the various and constant demands on our senses, reading *The Flat* is also a paradoxically enjoyable stressful experience because it uses digital technology and narrative devices that immerse us in a mysterious, chilling, and ultimately compelling fictional world.

Readers enter the flat referred to in the title at the bottom of a darkened hallway with stairs leading to a floor above. In the top right-hand corner of the screen a timer counts down, starting at two minutes ten seconds. In this opening scene, as the rest of the fiction, readers must use the mouse to explore the space. However, irrespective of the speed with which the reader moves the mouse, the way in which the cursor responds is slow and measured, almost sluggish. Not only does this mean that the flat is revealed very slowly to the reader, but it serves to work against the ticking timer, intensifying the temporal urgency that this device generates. Any temptation to explore the flat as quickly as possible is tempered if not thwarted by fragments of text that appear when the reader moves the mouse over particular parts of the screen. Like the timer, these textual elements have a limited existence however, displayed on-screen for barely long enough for them to be read, once at most. This is not a contemplative space but, at the same time, any urge to explore the flat quickly must be balanced with the need to read textual fragments that emerge slowly.

'You were right about me hiding the truth' the first fragment of text declares. The use of 'you' here explicitly invokes an unnamed individual who is both the reader and not the reader at the same time. That is, even though the narrator describes attributes, occurrences, and features that cannot be known to or associated with the reader, because the reader is interacting with the space and generating the narrative via their mouse clicks and movements, they are forced into the 'you' position. Indeed the second-person pronoun 'you' powerfully draws the reader into the fictional space, even if the 'you' also partially refers to an unseen and unknown fictional addressee.
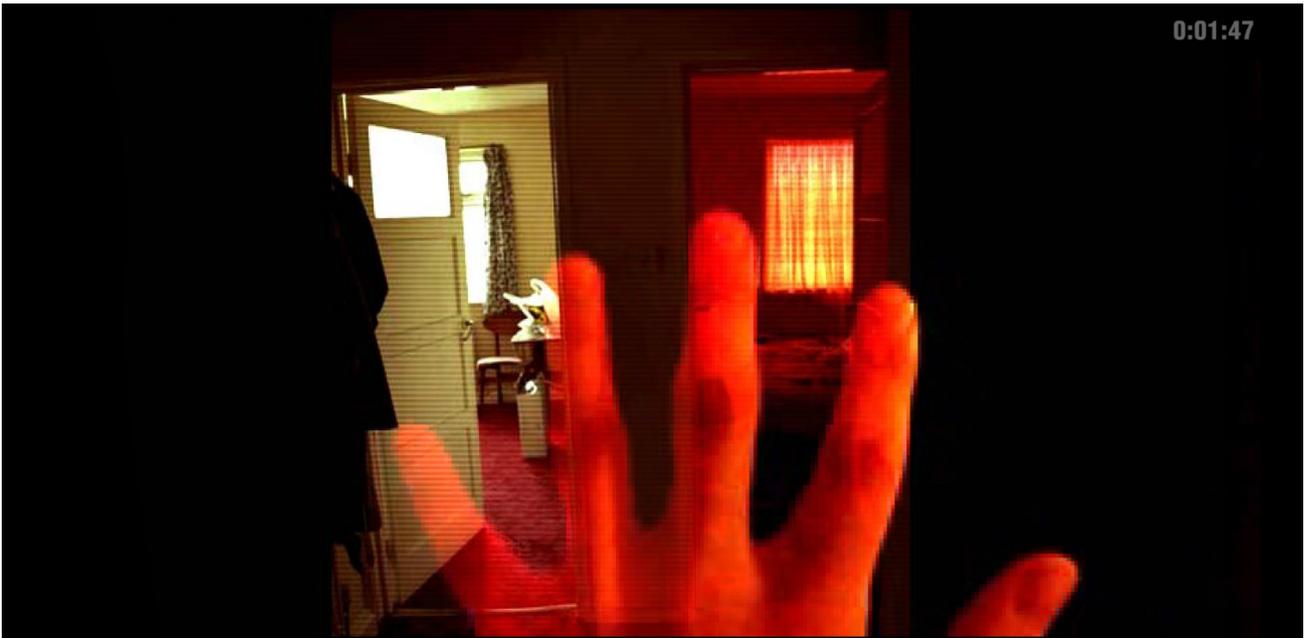
Once the reader reaches the top of the stairs, they are presented with a choice of two rooms. A hand appears on screen, held out as though physically exploring the immediate space. Crucially, the hand is positioned such that it could only emanate from a spatial position that is currently occupied by the reader. And while, of course, the hand does not belong to the reader, like the use of 'you', it works to anchor the reader within digital space, mooring them to something that is both not them and them at the same time. In my research, I have define this as a "digital counterpart" of the reader being created inside the fictional world.

As we explore the flat further - working against the clock - we find that the three rooms in the flat - the bedroom, bathroom, and lounge - appear to be inhabited but currently unoccupied. Dark shadows are intermittently infiltrated with shards of faint light, emanating from an unknown source. Each time we click the screen to explore parts of the flat further the screen flashes with images of static as though there are electrical disturbances taking place. The screen sporadically jolts as though interference to a transmission has occurred. A foreboding soundtrack is also occasionally interrupted with the crackling noises of static which imply that some kind of transmission is being interrupted.

In addition to the visual and audio features, text is used to create a sinister and otherworldly atmosphere. Like the entrance to the flat, each room contains fragments of text which, if the reader can read them before they dissolve, constructs a collection of memories with new snippets appearing if the rooms are left and re-entered. The narrator reflects on a previous era in which the 'you' - 12 years old at the time - would experience mysterious sensations, suspect something was amiss, and search for explanations. Yet while the narrator reflects on what is apparently a shared experience between them and 'you', the reader is alienated from these memories because the narrator's observations consistently lack detail and are therefore quite vague and at times abstract. They claim that 'it always seemed to die down when you were here' and that 'sometimes it came close to your skin' with any explanation of what 'it' is never given. The narrator muses that

'everything is so difficult to see from here' but the exact time and location of the events are never specified. Instead, the reader must infer the temporal setting from the dated décor in the flat. They speak of 'a slow dusty sludge of what appears to be nothing except bags of clothes and cold space'. Here, the semantic clash between the 'dusty' and 'sludge' and thus the description of something that is at once dry and wet creates a conflicting image of how particular materials would usually behave. The account that we are given is therefore unusual and sometimes incongruous with our experience. Rather than providing information from which the reader can start to build a definitive fictional world, this mass of indistinct imagery makes the scene seems increasingly mysterious.

Once the timer inevitably runs out, irrespective of where we are in the flat, we hear a roar. A sound of shattering glass plays and we find ourselves within the corner of a day-lit room with the only option for escape being the front door. A figure walks by, occluded by a frosted window and as the door opens a mysterious figure dressed in a white hooded cape stands outside. The screen goes dark and our time inside the flat is over. However, the ambiguous and foreboding sounds, images, and words we are exposed to throughout *The Flat* leave us feeling that there is more to discover so that when the onscreen text asks us whether we want to 're-enter the flat', we are compelled to start the experience again.

Indeed, while the indeterminacy of this world is puzzling, it is also very enticing. We search the rooms of the flat seeking more information, we try and read the textual fragments before they evaporate, we attempt to decode the ambiguous language, and when our two minutes and ten seconds are up we try again.

The urge to explore the mysteries of the flat again and again is, I would argue, generated because we are immersed in the experience. 'Immersion' as an experience is defined in relevant cognitive theory as the experience of being completely enveloped or engaged in a particular task or experience. Immersion can occur when reading a book, watching a film, or playing a videogame and researchers such as [Marie-Laure Ryan](#) have developed different categories of immersion that can be used to explain the different ways in which a work of fiction can affect us. In digital fictions, [my research](#) has shown that readers commonly have to combine gameplay, 3D navigation, interaction with objects, and reading, and they are exposed to a wide range of audiovisual stimuli that draw their attention to different elements of the storyworld at different times during the experience. Immersion in digital fiction is therefore a multifaceted and multidimensional experience. How does it work in *The Flat*?

As the preceding discussion has shown *The Flat* utilises various different modes for storytelling (i.e. the combination of sound, image, text) and different forms of interactivity (e.g. panning around the screen, mouse-clicks). It also limits the reader's agency by slowing down the pace of exploration and restricting their reading time. All of these elements work individually and together to create immersive features in digital fiction. The internal visual perspective and the use of 'you' both place the reader within the space and time of the fictional world and thus create what is called 'spatio-temporal immersion'; the chilling atmosphere generated by the dark and eerie setting causes a response to setting called 'spatial immersion'; and the lack of detail that stimulates our desire to find out more about the fictional world leads to 'temporal immersion' which is the form of

immersion that keeps us reading a story in a desire to know more. These three forms of immersion are generated in printed literary texts such as novels and poems but since *The Flat* is a digital fiction, it also generates a form of immersion that occurs in digital environments specifically. Since readers have to explore the flat by using a mouse - albeit at a restricted pace - and they are uncovering the narrative against the clock, they become engaged and absorbed in what is a compelling, exploratory task. They therefore experience what is known as 'ludic immersion', which relates to aspects of gameplay generated via the interactive features in a text.
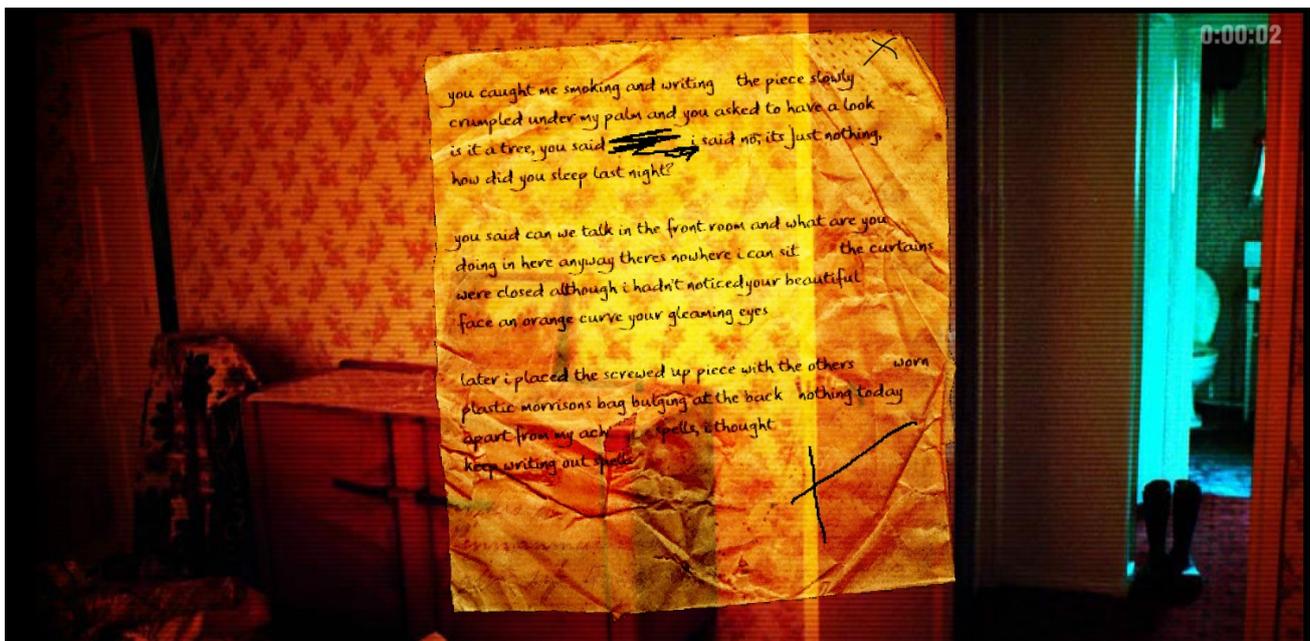
The fact that we want to re-enter the flat to achieve our goal of uncovering the narrative and solving the mystery of the narrator's tale (not to mention to the unexplained growl and hooded figure) suggests that ludic immersion is particularly prominent in this experience. However, spatio-temporal, temporal, and spatial immersion are also generated suggesting that narrative elements in *The Flat* also contribute to the reader's experience. The different forms of immersion come in and out with some being more prominent at one time than another but combined they create the enjoyable stressful experience that is *The Flat*.

You can read more about immersion in digital fiction in: Bell, Alice, Ensslin, Astrid, van der Bom, Isabelle and Smith, Jen (2018). 'Immersion in Digital Fiction.**'** *International Journal of Literary Linguistics*, **7 (1).**

You can read more about the use of 'you' in digital fiction in: Bell, Alice and Ensslin, Astrid (2011). "'I know what it was. You know what it was": Second-person narration in hypertext fiction.' *Narrative*, **19 (3), 311-329.**

You can read more about the way in which digital fictions place the reader in the fictional world in Alice Bell (2016). '"I felt like I'd stepped out of a different reality": Possible Worlds Theory, Metalepsis and Digital Fiction' in Gavins, Joanna and Lahey, Ernestine, (eds.) *World Building: Discourse in the Mind*. **Advances in stylistics. Bloomsbury, 15-32.**