

## 6 More than a game?

**OUR SIMULATORS ARE NOT ARCADE OR COMPUTER GAMES.** Their cockpits and controls are identical to the real aircraft, and they replicate the sensation of flying to extraordinary degrees of accuracy. **Participants should be 14 years of age or over.** (Pamphlet advertising simulator 'flights', Yorkshire Flight Centre, Knaresborough.)

Cyberpunk fiction and cyberculture theorising have no monopoly of interest in the uncomfortable slippage that might accompany the potential for simulation offered by computer games. The three-way intersection between simulation, game and real, in particular, has exercised different constituencies in different ways. For the Yorkshire Flight Centre attempting to drum up custom for their ex-Royal Air Force F4 Phantom jet fighter simulator the stridency of their objection to any possible confusion is communicated through the use of emboldened block capitals. They really have a point they want to make. The distinction between simulation and game screams off the page – this is not a game. 'No children' this advertisement demands, or at least 'no children under 14 years of age'. Simulation has 'participants', not 'players'. This is 'identical' to the 'real' they assert in a gesture towards absolutes, it 'replicates the sensation' they admit as they throttle down through hyperbole to be left only with 'extraordinary degrees of accuracy'. This might not be 'only a game', and is therefore far more 'serious', and more 'adult', but it remains something 'extraordinary'. There is no prospect that this might reach an 'ordinary' degree of accuracy capable of passing as the real that does not bring our attention, always, to the exceptional nature of the simulatory event. This is not real, it is simulation. As simulation it is not a game.

This lack of substance to any confusion between real, simulation and game is even more apparent to the player of computer games than it is to the customers of the Yorkshire Flight Centre. The complex and sophisticated flight sims for the PC might have now exceeded the level of visual detail available on machines once used to train combat pilots, but their players recognise that what they confront is realism and not real. It would be a rare individual player who would go beyond the purchase of a top of the range joystick and rudder peddles and invest not only in an accurate mock-up of a cockpit area but in the solid state hydraulics needed to replicate pitch and roll. Our PlayStation gamepads might tremble with their little internal motors when we fire our weapons, but this is hardly the kick of actual recoil. The computer game version of simulation is of a different order to those simulations intended to 'fool' as many of the senses as possible, and for far more practical purposes before they are sold on as vehicles for entertainment. For the flight sim aficionado the game is all about 'realism', all about 'authenticity', but with reference to the limits of the game rather than to the lack of limit of the real. Only the real is open to truly open-ended possibilities of action, only the real can address all our sensory input. The PC flight sim is the bastard child of the simulators used to train pilots, and does not make any comparable attempt to 'deceive'.

The player plays the game in the full knowledge that it is a game, and that life is not so conveniently organised according to the principles of narrative telling. The cockpit detail is present in our flight sims, but present on screen, rendered in something approximating three dimensions, but flat on the screen. We expect 'accuracy', but we do not expect or demand something indistinguishable from the real. We might have force-feedback joysticks, but few players have a set-up that judders and shakes when we hit air turbulence. Nor would many players want such a set-up, that would turn a diverting entertainment into something far less casual. Some gestures made to the artificiality of conventions of

representation make sure that combat flight sims, in particular, remain playable as games, rather than attempt to confuse the sim experience with real experience. When flames run back from the nose of the plane we feel no heat; when we throw the plane into too tight a turn the screen might go blank to represent blackout at high-G, but we feel none of the pressure on our bodies, we experience no equivalent level of nausea. It is only a game – which is why we play. To play combat flight sims with the expectation that one might really die, or even be fooled for the moment that we might die, would severely limit its appeal. It would certainly take the ‘fun’ out of the experience.

All flight sims make greater or lesser claims to verisimilitude, with titles such as *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2002* at one possible extreme, and a pulp shoot-‘em-up like *Crimson Skies* (2000) at the other. But even Microsoft have noticed that the addition of narrative potential adds something to a series that had often been praised for its technical sophistication but was generally viewed as overly worthy in its concentration on the technical simulation of flight. The 2002 edition of *Flight Simulator* might only provide fetch and carry ‘missions’ based around the kind of flights commercial pilots might conceivably be asked to undertake, rather than the barnstorming heroics of *Crimson Skies’* Zeppelin-busting and dog-fighting against ‘impossible’ odds, but both are telling stories, rather than simply attempting to replicate or simulate the real. The use of the term ‘simulation’ helps to distinguish one title from another, and to describe the different kinds of pleasure that the specific examples offer, but it is always a term that needs to be understood in the context of the computer game, and is never a serious claim to a form of simulation that threatens our ability to distinguish between simulation and game, let alone simulation and real.

Not all reactions to this possibility of slippage between simulation, real and game are as stern as that of the Phantom jet simulator’s owners, however. What might follow if we accept that we might no longer be able to distinguish between lived experience

in the world and the fictional experience offered by the game-fiction has been treated with some levity, for example, by the writers of the British science fiction comedy television series *Red Dwarf* (1988–). Computer games in this far future have become not so much indistinguishable from life, but, as the title of the clearest example of a game played by the crew of *Red Dwarf* makes clear, ‘better than life’. Of course, *Red Dwarf* is a comedy that veers between affectionate self-parody of that particular kind of masculinity that might be termed ‘laddishness’ and sending up the conventions of its own genre location, but in the process it demonstrates the ways in which concerns about the computer game as a technology of simulation are already easily recognisable to a popular audience.

The parallels that are drawn between the escapist fantasy of *Better Than Life* and the use of hard drugs also represent a clear nod to the cyberpunk aesthetic of William Gibson et al., with ‘users’, ‘pushers’, and ‘game-heads’ ruining their lives and presenting themselves as a social and individual evil that means that we should ‘just say no’ to the game.<sup>1</sup> A fairly serious satirical point is being made here, and the usual adolescent clichés of the computer game have been wheeled out as the deepest desires of the player’s subconscious are tapped in a defensive move by the game to ensure its own survival. One of the crew members imagines a world in which his every whim is catered for by bare-breasted Valkyries; a sprawling multinational business empire emblematised by the presence of phallic ‘Rimmer Towers’ in major world capitals has been constructed by another; a third has engaged in mawkish sentimentality in recreating the milieu of Frank Capra’s film *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946).<sup>2</sup> A joke is being played out here at the expense of many of the common assumptions that are made about the players of computer games – that they are male, immature, are only interested in women in terms of breast-size, and what they mean by ‘better than life’ shows the banality of an imagination stunted by the encounter with computer games rather than somehow nurtured

by it. The computer game as effective simulation becomes a vehicle for sixth-form pornography, for a classic compensation of inadequacy in the real world, and for a sentimentalisation that even the subject recognises as emotionally immature.

What is intriguing in the account offered by Rob Grant and Doug Naylor, however, is the way in which they deal with the issue of fictionality when the distinction between life and game is realised by its players. Unlike Iain M. Banks's *Culture citizens*, the players of *Red Dwarf's* game should really be in no need of synthetic cues to remind them that what is represented is not real. Players of *Better Than Life*, like the players of *Half-Life*, 'know' that this is not the real, for all that the fulfilment of their inner desires persuades them to lie to themselves and remain 'immersed'. *Red Dwarf* is not merely science fiction, but science fiction parody, and much entertainment is provided by the audience knowledge and protagonist ignorance that this allows. The eventual realisation of the fictionality of the experience of *Better Than Life* (and that it is killing the players in the real world as they neglect all those inconvenient bodily matters not dealt with while we are playing a game) does not lead to an immediate ending of engagement with the game, however.<sup>3</sup> The possibility of immersion proves to be more than a consequence of technical sophistication. The players stay 'in' the game-world not because they have confused it with the real, but because its very 'unreality' is attractive. This is a seductive, rather than deceptive, fictional form. Only when *Better Than Life* ceases to be 'better than life' do the crew decide to try and leave the game.

Instead of 'better than life' the player of the contemporary game-fiction has access to something 'other than life', to textual 'half-life', to something emerging from a 'space between', to 'sim', rather than 'simulation'. In short, they have access to text. Game-fictions might be escapist, as so much fiction of various forms is, but the utility of that escape demands our recognition of an imperative for return. The computer game does not allow us meaningful entry into another world any more than the Narnia novels

of C. S. Lewis (rather than the magical wardrobe) allow us entry into that world. Those of us who teach literature might be frustrated that we sometimes find it necessary to point out that Jane Eyre does not asphyxiate if we close the book, or that Hamlet (as character) is not able to make choices within *Hamlet* (as authored text), but it is not as necessary as some might think to make the same gesture to the player of game-fictions. We already 'know' that Lara Croft 'stars' in her own adventures, and that Freeman is both not us and not real. Rimmer might desire to stay 'in' his own management game while he is the success he has not been in life; the Cat might want to live out his puerile misogynist fantasy until his Valkyrie sex-slaves go on strike; Lister may prefer the sentimentality of Frank Capra's vision of idealised happy families to a real world in which he is the 'last man' condemned to solitude, but it is hard to see any game-fiction player or reader so succumbing to the illusion of immersion currently on offer in the games they actually play or the texts they actually read.

### Realism is dead, long live realism

Whether or not the term postmodern is adequate to describe them, many of our contemporary works of fiction have obviously attempted to negotiate the demands of their moment of production and reflect cultural anxieties and cultural change. How we tell our stories to ourselves is as much a subject to debate as how technologies of communication might affect other areas of our lives. As J. G. Ballard noted when discussing the role of the (male) author confronted by the 'marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the 20th century' in a 1995 introduction to his novel of the city and the machine, *Crash* (1973):

Can he, any longer make use of the techniques and perspectives of the traditional 19th century novel, with its linear narrative, its measured chronology, its consular characters grandly inhabiting their domains within an ample time and space? ... I feel

myself that the writer's role, his authority and licence to act, have changed radically. I feel that, in a sense, the writer knows nothing any longer. He has no moral stance. He offers the reader the contents of his own head, a set of options and imaginative alternatives. His role is that of a scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with an unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts.<sup>4</sup>

A possibly extreme reading of such a statement might imply that we finally have reached that moment at which the novel (or at least the realist novel that has been buried and exhumed on a number of previous occasions) is dead. Its devices are no longer adequate to the task of representation, and its techniques are disabled by the encounter with the present. The scientist, and not the writer, shall inherit the future. And yet Ballard's regret at the passing of authorial 'licence' and 'authority' should not be felt by the designers of the game-fiction, that product emerging from the very moment in which Ballard writes his new introduction to *Crash*. The break has not been so radical as Ballard supposes. On the one hand this sounds like a manifesto that could be adopted by gamers who foresee the ascendancy of the game-fiction, which is all about the testing of 'hypotheses', 'options' and 'imaginative alternatives', all about offering the 'contents' and not the authored and fixed 'meaning' of a single imaginative possibility. On the other hand, the game-fiction, as Chapters 4 and 5 should have made particularly clear, has not made the same kind of radical departure from nineteenth-century realism that Ballard sees as necessary for the writer of literary fiction. Game-fiction texts, as the brief discussion of *Black & White* indicated in Chapter 5, contain their own 'morality', allow us access (in *SimCity* and *The Sims*) to that same 'ample time and space' that had been the domain of a Dickens, a Thackeray or an Austen. Their imaginative alternatives consistently fall back into the linear narratives that reassure by their very familiarity, their characters remain 'grandly consular' in conception. The narrative game-fiction,

still in its infancy but maturing rapidly, has not rejected its roots, but instead remains fixed in narrative traditions.

We can be so blinded by the sheen reflecting off our consoles and computers and by the hype of their public relations machines that we no longer see just how traditional the narratives on offer really are. We are always in danger of prioritising 'computer' over 'game', 'game' over 'fiction', and making too many assumptions about the 'virtual' that do not take proper account of the 'real'. The technological now that troubles Ballard as it appears to invert the traditional relations of author and text, real and imaginary, is also the focus of Jean Baudrillard's short essay 'Aesthetic Illusion and Virtual Reality'. In Baudrillard's words:

We don't need digital gloves or a digital suit. As we are, we are moving around in a world as in a synthetic image. We have swallowed our microphones and headsets, producing intense interference effects, due to the short circuit of life and its technical diffusion. We have interiorised our own prosthetic image and become the professional showmen of our own lives.<sup>5</sup>

And yet in the encounter with the game-fiction all these trappings remain necessary. Baudrillard's conclusions, focused here on how we approach reality television, do not apply unproblematically to the computer game, and particularly to the computer game-fiction with narrative ambition or narrative purpose. The computer game is entertaining because it is extraordinary in content and form, because it never tries to normalise itself and simply reflect the mundanity of existence. If it did, quite bluntly, then it would be no fun. No fun, no reason for playing the game. It might still simulate, but it would not be a narrative text open to reading. The player of games does not exist outside of the world that Baudrillard describes, however. Instead he or she is always already aware of the act of swallowing the microphone and the headset, aware that he or she has entered into a particular form of reading contract with the text that Coleridge might still have been able to recognise. 'You don't

bring my attention too often to the artificiality of this experience by providing inferior text,' it states 'and I will suspend my disbelief for the moment'. 'Tell me a story that I want to read,' our narrative game-fictions are told, 'and I will read on.' When we play the computer game we do not clamber into the cockpit of a physical simulator and accept that we are in a different and virtual world until the ride is over. Instead that contractual agreement is constantly renewed in an extended series of moments in which we exercise our willingness to be deceived.

One way of considering how that contractual agreement is arrived at might be thought of through consideration of 'interactivity'. Again, Iain Banks' gameplaying protagonist in *Complicity* provides a clear example of how this functions both in the present, and in a possible extrapolated future:

Because *Despot* is interactive, *Despot* will go on building your world for you even if you leave it alone because it actually *watches* you; it learns your playing style, it knows you, it will try its little damndest to *become* you. All world-builder games – emulating life or at least some aspect of it – develop and change according to their programmed rules if you leave them running alone, but *Despot* is the only one that with a bit of coaching will actually attempt to emulate *you*.<sup>6</sup>

To borrow a basic understanding of how we view objects from the work of Jacques Lacan, what we have here (at least *in potentia*, in *Despot* far more than in *SimCity*, apparently in *Black & White* and actually in *Despot*) is the object gazing back at us. It is watching us watching it. We do not simply 'look' or 'gaze' or 'watch' the unfolding text, but the text is watching us in way that can only have the potential to disturb in our age of increasing technological surveillance.<sup>7</sup> The essential characteristic of what is termed interactivity in relation to the computer game is that it *must* watch the reader. We act. It reacts. We act again. It reacts again. It rewards our attention with attention of its own. This might be presented to us in 'real-time' but we are locked in a complex dialogue or dance with

the machine that amounts to a sequence of exchange that goes both ways. Even not to act is an act, and signifies. And in that dialogue of absence and action rests the fundamental claim to interactivity of the computer game. But this is also not simply a movement outside of history that debunks any common-sense misunderstanding of the act of reading as a passive experience in which the consumers consume like grazing cattle, but is intensely historical in a way that is distinct from our traditional understanding of the viewing of the object. The text we read watches us over time, it presents the illusion of 'knowing' us as we come to 'know' it, of 'reading' us as we 'read' it. The player of *Despot*, at least, is being textualised by the game, rendered into binary code that represents our action of reading in a way that means that our textual selves might be recorded, transmitted and replicated. We are not only given authorial responsibility by the interactive text, but we are becoming the textual subject.

How we feel about this, and whether our potential to all become something like Gibson's 'construct' Dixie Flatline, might mark us out as particular kinds of readers who embrace or reject the game-fiction, but it is going to be more or less inevitable as computer game-fictions increasingly read us as we read them. Such a move will not be undertaken so that the game-fiction might become a parasitic and dangerous text, as it was in *Better Than Life*, but so that we can engage in a joint act of cooperative narration that blurs the boundary between text and author in a way that would surprise even J. G. Ballard.

### The shape of things to come

Matters of structural organisation inevitably contribute to meaning, and what might appear to have been an odd or even eccentric ordering of the chapters of this volume would probably benefit from some belated explanation. Faced with the task of looking in detail at four specific examples, the simple question of the order in which to place the individual readings comes to the fore. To fall

back on the standard of chronological sequence (sequels aside, something like *SimCity*, *Tomb Raider*, *Close Combat*, *Half-Life*) would have made this one kind of text. Inherent in such an order would have been an informing faith in a kind of progressivism as absolute as that which is embedded in the operation of *SimCity*. 'Newer' would imply 'better'. We might look to the oldest example with nostalgia or historical interest, but not with any hope that it might represent the most advanced, or even 'best' example. To fall into such an ordering sequence would also imply at least tacit acceptance of the rampant technophilia that is evident in the pre-release publicity for computer games, in our relation to computer hardware, and in wider popular culture itself. Interest here, as in the spoof 'rockumentary' *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), is in the piece of equipment with the dial that goes up to eleven. 'Better' equates with an often disappointed promise of excess, with an impossible 'louder' in the case of *Spinal Tap*'s amplifier, and not with the quality of the sound produced. Or, in the case of such a privileging of the newest or latest computer game-fiction, better equates with faster artificial intelligence routines, bigger levels, higher frame-rates, more polygons, more on-screen movement, more account taken of more and more variables. Which does not necessarily mean 'better' game as narrative text or reading experience, only 'better' game as technical exercise.

The kind of games discussed in this study do not rely on our understanding of a newly instated digital or 'cyber' age in which things have changed, and changed utterly, but belong within traditions of narrative representation that go back to our earliest recorded tellings, and have been subject to critical analysis since Aristotle. When the need for the construction of a satisfying narrative is subordinated to the accommodation of increasing technological advance, then the designers of game-fictions might even be going down a blind alley, forgetting what it is that makes game-fictions readable and playable in the search for the elusive 'eleven' on the dial. The technology is a vital part of the game-fiction text,

and of the experience of reading that text, but it is not the only element of the computer game, or necessarily the most significant, that we should pay attention to.

The second obvious option of ordering that was available was that based on the shifts in proximity to in-game events signalled through the placement of the point of view allowed to the player and the reader. This, in turn, would have implied that one extreme or another was more significant. Either the first-person camera of *Half-Life* or the near omniscience of *SimCity* would have been privileged. Either the god-game with its readerly pleasures of the illusion of the 'open-ended' and the possible, or the first-person shooter with its emphasis on the possibility of 'immersion' would have emerged, somehow, as victor. It was this latter possibility that concerned me most, with its accompanying realisation that it is an ill-considered misunderstanding of that immersive potential that has contributed so much to the popular unease that greets the game-fiction.

Even if we put aside the negative reading of such games as a contributory factor in school shootings or other acts of violence, then its increasing visual and aural refinement has taken our attention away from the thing itself, and towards the possibilities for future development it seems to lay claim to. The abstract is always given more attention than the real object. It is the first-person shooter, after all, that has had a mutually informing relationship with cyberpunk since Case first 'jacked in' to the 'matrix' in *Neuromancer*, that seems to offer a species of liberation (we can live in a hyper-real that is always more than the real can offer) and a species of possible threat (we neglect the real, and we die). To the Dixie flatline in Gibson's novel was given a surprisingly conservative attitude towards the potential of living a solely digital 'life'. The reward that he, or the construct that he has become, demands for services rendered is not the freedom to roam cyberspace, but the liberation of erasure. The matrix is certainly not 'better than life' for the flatline, but worse than 'death'. The point throughout this

volume has been far more prosaic than Gibson's. Game-fictions might provide material for novelists and film-makers who produce truly startling works of enquiry on the unstable boundary between the 'real' and the 'virtual', but they do not, as yet, represent a movement towards the erasure of that boundary to any significant extent.

The final order in which the four textual studies have been presented here is an attempt to communicate variation without hierarchy, difference without ranking, and a recognition that game-fiction is a plural form in which a range of different strategic moves are made beneath the banner of realism. These are four readings of four very different texts, and the connections that can be made are not always sequential. *Tomb Raider* and *SimCity* offer more to their potentially subversive readers than *Half-Life*. *Close Combat* and *Half-Life* have a clearer relationship with each other than might at first appear, with both attempting to reflect the limits of possible action rather than allowing the superhuman exploits of Lara Croft or the 'godly' agency of *SimCity*. All these examples produce what we recognise as narrative, but they all construct that narrative in different ways and to different effect. If anything, in their variety and plurality they insist that we recognise that the game-fiction is a diverse cultural product, still emerging blinking into the light, but with the potential to develop into something significant as a form of narrative delivery that is currently restricted in its achievements not so much by the available technology, but by the creative input of its designers.

### The computer game as fictional form revisited

#### How [playing computer games] affects lives

- don't have any other hobbies
- don't talk to others
- don't talk to families
- hurts their eyes
- don't get fresh air
- get unfit

- nothing else to talk about

(From 'How to Write a Journalistic Report: Writing Support Sheet' in a resource book for teachers, *Year 6 Non-fiction Writing*)<sup>8</sup>

I am not a social scientist, and am not qualified to engage in the debates that surround the empirical measurement of the amount of time spent (or 'wasted') in the playing of computer games by the young, or of the empirical relationship that may or may not exist between on-screen violence and violent acts in the world. Specialist or not, however, it is easy enough to identify examples of a negative reception of the computer game that demand some consideration even in a study that considers game-fiction with the same seriousness we take to our other forms of popular text. By chance I came across the above 'support sheet' for a 'writing frame' within a publication of resources designed for primary school teachers working within the English National Curriculum. Having read an example of a television report dealing with the censorship of films and the granting of certificates by the British Board of Film Classification, the students would be invited to write their own short television script within the frame provided on the subject of children and computer games. The accompanying support sheet is designed to nudge the student towards producing a certain kind of text. I have no quarrel with any of this, and would recognise the educational value of teaching our children to write for specific audiences and to be aware of the demands of different forms of writing.

The 'useful ideas' offered by the author of the resource pack, however, act as a thumbnail sketch of prevailing attitudes towards the computer game that might suggest that writing this book was a waste of time. Given the 'useful ideas' provided, the student is expected to engage in what for the player of computer games, even the player who would demand that they are 'only a game', would have to be an exercise in severe self-criticism. Playing the computer game is an asocial if not antisocial activity, it retards our ability to communicate, it ruins our family life, it does us

physical harm, it leads to illness (and potentially, presumably, to death). It makes us 'unfit'. Other 'useful ideas' had invited the student to add that it costs a small fortune and fills all available time. It really does begin to look as if it is a social evil. Most of the negative characteristics mentioned in relation to the computer game might be made of hard-drug abuse, and the parallel, as with *Neuromancer* or *Red Dwarf*, is hard to ignore. The computer game appears to be a new opiate for the masses, a method of numbing the mind as effective as heroin or crack-cocaine abuse, and as disapproved of, if not actually illegal. As pointed out in Chapter 1, however, the same accusations can be levelled at the reading of novels, and particularly at the reading of novels with the intensity open only to the very young, as the sales of the 'Goosebumps' series of genre horror novels or the 'Discworld' series of comedy fantasy novels might indicate. That people want to play computer games, that they are potentially 'addictive' because they offer a form of pleasure not available elsewhere, is conspicuously absent from the text that the students are invited to write. The writing frame leaves them with nothing positive to say about an experience of popular culture that might have been a significant part of their maturation. As succeeding generations emerge unscathed from the experience of playing computer games without being transformed into gibbering idiots, attitudes might begin to change, but at present the computer game is the pariah of fictional forms. We should, perhaps, at least consider if it deserves such a dubious status.

Individual addiction or obsession is always an individual tragedy, but it is the extent to which all playing of computer games, all reading of game-fictions, is implicated here that is so extreme. As an educationalist working within the academic subject of English Studies I am aware that I teach literature not to construct a production line of future creative writers, or even because I have a love for my subject that I wish to share, but because 'reading' is a recognisable skill that is valued by employers and, even, still valued by wider society. And 'reading' in most university English

departments has expanded its meaning beyond the study of a once fixed canon of 'great works' to include the reading of popular genre fictions, of films, and of television programmes. Although there might not be universal popular approval for such a move, we treat all such texts with the same degree of rigour, and with the same care as we treat the literary artwork. Whether or not at least that sub-set of computer games that I have termed game-fictions is similarly deserving of serious study needs to be considered if this volume is to come to a conclusion, rather than simply an ending.

There is something here, then, that might invite comprehension through the lens of Walter Benjamin's remarks in an essay that has often been read in relation to other forms of popular text, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.<sup>9</sup> If the work of art of that mechanical age had been infinitely reproducible and homogenised, and stripped away of the mystery and 'aura' once associated with the original (that Cleanth Brooks would have recognised as the 'well-wrought urn'), then the work of art in our own supposedly digital age appears to restore the mystery and return the 'aura' to us – we all have access to, and only to, an original. The text I construct as I read *Tomb Raider* or *Half-Life* belongs only to me, and to me alone. In effect, 'I wrought the urn'. No other player or reader reads or writes the same text. It is unique. It is an original. Every one of us is author, every one of us is artist. There is something truly radical here, something significantly novel, something that demands that we rethink the ways in which we view the artwork, and our relationship with the individual work of art.

Until, that is, we boot the computer, insert the CD and confront the banality of what is currently realised within an intersection between text and technology that promises so much and delivers so little. I have no real doubt that at some point in the not too distant future we will see game-fictions that do move to break away from the mechanical to the virtual, and allow us to lose ourselves more easily in an immersive experience that will still have to

have textual content to offer any appeal to its readership, but in the here and now of the moment of writing all one can do is look at the current crop of derivative, primitive examples and weep for what might have been and hope for what might be to come. *Tomb Raider*, *Half-Life*, *Close Combat* and *SimCity* are all pleasurable enough reading experiences, and were part of my own leisure time activities long before I decided to subject them to critical scrutiny, but I would hesitate to call them 'art' in a way that I would not when discussing the fiction of Iain Banks, even when he is writing genre science fiction with the extra 'M' inserted into his name.

Are game-fictions capable of being more than a game? Yes, as a form of fiction they demand careful critical scrutiny of how they communicate their meanings that might otherwise be disallowed, or at least never be undertaken, if we simply accept that they are a social evil from which our children must be protected. Are they 'better than life', do they even represent a threat to life? No, or at least no more so than our other fictions. As a form of fiction the game-fiction demands that it be 'read' and not simply 'experienced'. As the earliest cinema criticism recognised that film was a form of text only mobilised by the act of reading, and not something approximating the re-presentation of unmediated lived experience, so should criticism of the computer game-fiction recognise the act of reading that it demands.

Walter Benjamin identified the 'primary question' raised for the critic by an earlier technological advance as 'whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art'. At the risk of being another exponent of what Benjamin calls 'futile thought' (with reference to the blinkered critics who rarely went beyond questioning whether or not the photograph was 'art' at all), the same question seems to demand reply in relation to the game-fiction. As has probably become clear as we have looked at our series of concrete examples, the game-fiction has not changed the nature of art, but has presented itself as a novel experience of reading and telling in just as surprising a way as

photography and cinema did before it. Whatever the future holds, we must do far more than 'just say no' to the computer game.

## Notes

- 1 Even such a sympathetically presented game-playing protagonist as Cameron Colley in Iain Banks' *Complicity* reflects this fictional standard. Colley is an avid games player, a heavy smoker and a recreational drug user. By the close of the text he is diagnosed with lung cancer in another reworking of this direct connection between the playing of computer games, drug abuse, and the degeneration of the body.
- 2 References are to the novelisations of *Red Dwarf*, rather than to specific episodes where *Better Than Life* had been exploited more for the kind of dressing-up allowed by the presence of the holo-deck in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. See Grant Naylor [Rob Grant and Doug Naylor], *The Red Dwarf Omnibus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992). *Better Than Life* is the title of the second volume (originally published in 1990), but the most significant section of the text in relation to the immersive potential of the computer game is to be found in the closing section of the first volume, pp. 255–98. (Both these volumes are included in the *Omnibus*.)
- 3 Computer games manufacturers address this perception of the danger of their product in a number of ways. The manuals now usually include sensible epilepsy warnings, but then go on to protect themselves with warning notices that imply the potential 'addictiveness' of their product. The inside front cover of the manual for the roleplaying game *Baldur's Gate: Tales of the Sword Coast* precedes all other matter with an extended 'Health Warning' that might be less condemnatory than some health warnings, but nevertheless looks like it belongs on the side of a cigarette packet. *Baldur's Gate* also uses the screens that load between levels to offer advice (rather like those irritating 'Tips of the Day' that can pop up when certain Windows programmes are opened) that includes an instruction to take regular breaks and to eat. A sceptical reader of such warnings might wonder whether they are not just providing legal cover against potential lawsuits, but trading on the implication of potential immersion through technical

sophistication that such warnings carry.

- 4 J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995).
- 5 Jean Baudrillard, 'Aesthetic Illusion and Virtual Reality' in *Reading Images*, ed. Thomas, pp. 198–206, p. 198.
- 6 Ian Banks, *Complicity*, p. 53. Emphasis in original.
- 7 See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) pp. 67–79.
- 8 Sue Garnett, *Year 6 Non-Fiction Writing* (Preston: Topical Resources, 2002), p. 43.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, trans. Zohn, pp. 211–44.