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"The Play's The Thing" —Computer Simulations and Digital Storytelling: A Review of *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Murray, Janet H. (1997). New York: The Free Press, 324 pp.

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In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet H. Murray beams us up into a future where multimedia are the new purveyors of pop culture. Her take on the possible influences the computer will have on narrative is fascinating and packed with information, though, as with a lot of books with a prophetic bent, the accuracy of her vision remains to be seen. Murray argues that the computer, like technical innovations that preceded it, did not instantly or automatically produce the literary forms they enabled; hence, the print revolution occurs long after Gutenberg has made his mark. Similarly, motion pictures develop slowly through cradle films eventually culminating in some masterpieces. Her book is a learned speculation about the future of storytelling, to be shaped, she predicts, by a new medium capable of miraculous technological advances. In the face of Murray's broad knowledge of computer experiments and pop cultural connections, one cannot argue that the medium is not on the verge of becoming an instrument of artistic creation. Despite her tone of wonder and bemusement, as she recounts developments in MUDs, hot new computer games, and projects being carried out in the MIT lab where she works, Murray is cautious as well as democratic. She thus defends the position that no one medium can legitimately claim superiority over others, and that the appearance of a new medium does not by any means supplant the others. In other words, good television may be infinitely preferable to bad opera. Murray contends instead that, in a number of different media, the age of nonlinear narrative is upon us. To support her view, she cites works as varied as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and popular movies like *Clue*, *Groundhog Day*, and *Back to the Future* as harbingers of a computerized medium that is at once participatory, procedural, spatial, and encyclopedic.

In addition to claiming we are on the threshold of such new narratives, which her knowledge of cutting-edge experiments makes clear, she also makes some moral claims for this powerful new medium, in an effort to quell her own slight (and our stronger) fears that the computer itself may in some ways be antithetical to the works of the imagination.

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That the computer will become an instrument played with varying degrees of skill by human imagination seems indisputable. That it necessarily should, or that the consequences will be entirely progressive, is another matter. After all, it is in the age of the computer that one is most confronted with the fear that the mind may be only brain, however complex. Such a demystification of the mind may indeed make it harder to sustain poetic notions of human creativity or indeed of any flawed human activity. Murray writes that the computer can be a paradoxical therapy for the very anxiety it creates; she opines, for instance, "We fear the computer as a distorting fun house mirror of the human brain, but with the help of the narrative imagination, it might become a cathedral in which to celebrate human consciousness as a function of our neurology" (p. 282). But it is a long way from the circus to the church, and forms like drama have, in fact, moved in the opposite direction, going from liturgical solemnity to secular profanity as they developed. Murray's belief is that the multimedia computer awaits the arrival of a cyberbard—or of many—poets with poetic energy and moral force great enough to mold the technology to their ends, and for the greater good of all humanity. But such moral claims are hard to make not just for the computer but for any medium; at best, we can hope that the new tools fall into the right hands.

Some of the very features of the computer that Murray celebrates lead me to wonder whether the computer's poetic utterances will be more like karaoke than like choir. For instance, it is customary to cry up the computer's capacity to involve groups simultaneously, collaboratively, as a participatory medium. But sometimes, as I have occasionally wondered at conferences, if everyone is talking, is anyone really listening? Aesthetic experiences are valued, it is true, for their ability to allow us to overleap the bounds of our particularized humanity and experience shared pity and terror, or at the very least, sympathetic identification. But I find myself worried by Murray's frank but unsettling attachment to her computer pet, and I would more willingly applaud the adoption of a pet than the purchase of a Tamagotchi. It may be correct, as Murray states, that "characters like Buttons [her computer puppy] are a new kind of doubly animated figure, alive not only by the artfulness with which they have been made to look and move but also by the artfulness with which they have been programmed to be spontaneously responsive to the interactor's actions" (p. 245). For my part, the word "programmed" is too close to the word "spontaneous" for comfort. Murray considers "agency" to be one of the gains of multimedia storytelling, allowing a degree of reciprocity and feedback heretofore unknown. Yet how much of an agent can one be who learns how to use a packaged piece of software—no matter how complicated—in a way that out-Pavlovs Pavlov? At least, filmmakers and Madison Avenue executives, despite so-called progress in subliminal advertising, still move according to relatively hit-and-miss operations; programmed responses, however seemingly spontaneous, add a chill. When Murray describes the agency of computer users engaged in the new multiform stories as all of us "gradually becoming part of a worldwide repertory company" (p. 125), she reveals her assumption that participants are, for the most part, to be players, rather than authors. Although this line of thinking frees participants from a passive role as responders, it makes one imagine the audience as "Six Million Terminals in Search of an Author." If the ultimate goals of a deeper medium are ambivalence and interiority as Murray, also a nineteenth-century scholar, avers, then are the aesthetic rewards of immersion, agency, and transformation really worth pursuing? Reading a book might result in more ambivalence and interiority than an elaborate

choreography which a participant can play as prescribed by a talented gamemaster. If the capabilities of the new medium are truly immersion, agency, and transformation, the reasons for participating may need some revision too. I must confess too some fear of disorientation at the thought of such illusory productions, not unlike Alice in Wonderland's concern that the King of Hearts may be dreaming her, rather than she him.

Moral compunctions aside (temporarily), it seems to me that Murray at times conflates the maturity of the medium with the maturity of its human developers, a confusion of growth and production that does not draw an adequate distinction between the sometimes teenaged "shoot 'em-up" mentality of users and developers and the "immaturity," if you will, of the medium itself. In this regard, the book is blithely optimistic and thus vulnerable to charges that it has not taken into account the impact of a medium so grandly powerful that it can lead to immersion, agency, and transformation, all of which Murray lists as its proffered aesthetic delights. Sometimes this confusion appears to come from a blurring of the distinction between medium and form. The computer, like the printing press, is a medium, and as such, a technical advance, undeniably an explosive force for change. Although Murray makes some brilliant suggestions about the forms the computer might make manifest, they are not already in place, and still await an imagination able to bring them into being. Murray draws some useful parallels to the oral tradition, with its reliance of formulaic adaptations, as well as to famous catalogues of the plots and motifs of storytelling, and she longs for a modern Homer to bring them into the world. The underpinnings of Northrop Frye and Vladimir Propp lend credence to Murray's view that the codes and rules essential to successful plot making and to computer programming are not so far afield. Her longing for a more mature medium than that currently in the hands of adolescent boys might be better termed a yearning for form rather than for medium. Murray would not argue the distinction between them, but the relation she postulates between them seems to confuse the kinds of growth each is capable. To my mind, form is an organic thing, a feature of human growth such as Murray traces in the rites of passage Charlotte Bronte made in going from a child writing about a fantasy kingdom to becoming a woman writing about realistic choices in a grownup world. The medium, on the other hand, seems part of the production process, rather than the growth process, and hence a different order of things entirely. To give the medium priority over the form, or to assume that forms proceed from new media with some degree of inevitability, may be to treat technology with more respect than is often accorded human beings. As Ursula Franklin, an experimental physicist, argues,

> The real world of technology seems to involve an inherent trust in machines and devices ("production is under control") and a basic apprehension of people ("growth is chancy, one can never be sure of the outcome"). If we do not wish to visualize people as sources of problems and machines and devices as sources of solutions, then we need to consider machines and devices as cohabitants of this earth within the limiting parameters applied to human populations. (pp. 30–31)

It may seem at first like a chicken-or-the-egg argument to say that the emergence of the computer as medium should not be given precedence over the emergence of the forms it enables. Still, a book like Murray's sings the praises of the miraculous attributes of that medium inclines a reader to point out that both Charlotte and Branwell Bronte wrote stories. The story is only as good as its maker. Storytelling, even in the new challenging medium, remains chancy (and the course of its future hard to predict), not only because it is inherently human and flawed and still in the hands of immature youth, but for a differ-

ent reason. The medium itself comes with its own restrictions, limitations, and problems, perhaps not all of them redeemable through glossier production techniques or more mature handling.

Some of these problems inherent in the medium Murray admits freely, though she is sanguine about the solutions to be worked out in the future. One of them is the lack of closure stories in this new medium frequently display, when, as a result of their nonlinearity and their resemblance to mosaics, works like Michael Joyce's "Afternoon" leave the reader with an uneasy feeling that there may be more or that the place one stopped was not the ending. Murray imagines that viewers may someday enter into the stories they choose by selecting plotlines and endings as easily as we now surf channels. Closure, in such a vision, may become completely a thing of the past, and although that may harmonize nicely with the physics of our time, endings are part of what humans recognize as essential features of stories, though such an Aristotelian perspective may mark me out as a fogey.

Another part of the problem here is that the medium is, by Murray's admission, spatial. But what happens to narrative when its primary mode of existence becomes spatial rather than temporal? E. M. Forster, whose *Aspects of the Novel* Murray uses to delineate her notions of plot and character throughout the book, stresses the temporality of plotlines when he writes, "A plot is...a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot" (as cited in Murray, p. 185). The multimedia computer, with its potential freedom from real time, poses a danger for the typical sequential development of plotlines. Note too that Forster creates a useful distinction between the mere story and the plot—one that might get sloughed over in a medium not obedient to the strictures of time. One is left with the speculation that the discovery of virtual space the computer allows no compensation for the loss of temporal familiarity. Will the freedom to navigate in virtual space preempt notions of conventional plot? Murray is open to new vistas but unconcerned about their consequences for storytelling as we have always known it.

Another potentially laudable and inherently difficult characteristic of the new medium is its encyclopedic nature. Already the computer boggles many of us who feel, when confronted with a vast unmapped geography of the web, as if we are wandering lost through an airport looking for the right plane to reach our destination. The fact that Murray holds out the promise of "agency," that is, control, to prospective users of the medium is not comforting. So we are free, but we don't really know where we are going. In Murray's imaginative conception of a viewer's future engagement or interaction with the holodeck (borrowed from *Star Trek*), she likens the relation of "player" and a gamemaster to that of a dancer and a choreographer. Or, in a more mundane example, she draws an analogy to a murder mystery game. Someone, a master programmer or scriptwriter, creates a complex sequence of rules for a participant to follow in an improvised sort of way. Such an undertaking sounds possible and promising, but its fluidity makes me wonder what becomes of current notions of art along the way. Because *Hamlet* is in the book's title, let's use that example, one which Murray herself offers. You are given a series of rules in this procedural medium about how you are to respond, as Ophelia, to Hamlet's advances to you. Even assuming you comply with all the rules, that you are a competent actor, and even that you have a fair prior knowledge of Hamlet and of story conventions, do you come up with Hamlet at the end? Forget the canon for the moment: Do you come up with anything coherent at the end, given the multiple possibilities of

agency such a medium produces? Instead of asking with Yeats—"How can you tell the dancer from the dance?—one might ask if there is a dance. Although it is true that much contemporary literature explores the incoherence brought upon us by the physics of Einstein and those who follow their triumph, I would argue, is their ability to create coherence, as Tom Stoppard does in his play, *Arcadia*, when he imagines the same garden from two different points in time across the centuries. Such a work confronts physics head-on, and culminates, oddly enough, in a dance. Despite the participatory features of the new medium that Murray praises, I count myself among those who refuse to relinquish the notion of authorship and its primary agency, even though copyright and ownership of ideas are currently under siege. Coherence is integral to storytelling, and authorship and the control it confers seem to me a prerequisite of coherence. Advancements in knowledge do not lead immediately or necessarily to advancements in our understanding of meaning, and it is the latter that fuels our interest in stories. Encyclopedias are good sources for stories, and even sometimes stories are encyclopedic, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, but the dangers for coherence in an encyclopedic medium like this one are everywhere.

The difficulty of reconciling the hopes that Murray has for the new medium with its limitations is due to the computer's current use as something particularly suitable to games and to simulations of adversarial enterprises. Murray finds the games occasionally riveting, but even so, would like to see signs of development that would advance it from the binary notion of winning or losing to something deeper, and more emotionally ambivalent. Here again, the physics of our time seems to be the model of development and the greatest challenge to our hopes for meaning. Writers like Sterne, whom Murray mentions, had a healthy interest in games, and in their hands, as in Beckett's in the modern age, literature approached games to a profound extent. Murray's quarrel with games is not that they are procedural, a fact she accepts as readily as any other aspect of coding inherent in computer programming. Nor does she mind that they are simulations. Indeed, to take issue with multimedia computers as bad influences because they are simulations would be absurdly regressive, marking us not only as Luddites but as out-dated Puritans. Few of us appear to mind that fiction is a lie anymore, though it is a bit frightening to imagine the degree of immersion in simulation Murray's vision of the medium conjures up. What is upsetting to Murray and to me about the realm of games—the current state of computer fiction—are their values or their violent lack of values. But games and pornography prevail and perhaps even dominate not because of the medium, but precisely because of its accessibility to all and sundry—both a blessing and a curse. Like stories, games often possess the power to make one dizzily conscious of secret selves. Murray herself recounts an adventure with a computer game with the amusing name of *Mad Dog McCree*, an encounter with her own surprisingly violent nature despite her roles as a pacifist and as a mother. But although Murray is inclined to admire the dramatic qualities that allow for such immersion and for such confrontation (afterwards), games like this one clearly illustrate the power of such entertainments to grab an audience and to hold it spellbound, perhaps without the questioning of self, afterwards, that Murray finds herself prone to. Murray discusses the captivating quality of immersion in computer simulations and considers ways that conventions and boundaries need to be found that will reinforce the line between truth and fiction. Her most convincing solution to the problem is the conception of the visit—the idea that a participant must be able to become immersed in a story as a visit with a clearly established beginning and ending, something which at least gives

players an opportunity to shut the book or turn the set off at some juncture that keeps them in control. But as long as the medium remains democratic and populist, something that is likely to increase as the commercial ventures on the net grow stronger, Murray's call for a more morally and dramatically sensitive story development seems doomed to fail. This is not to say that Murray is wrong in her view that the computer age necessitates and will find new modes of storytelling—just that she may overstate the glory of such an event. The new medium is as much problem as potential. That it is here to stay is beyond question; that its arrival is cause for celebration is harder to determine. The unpredictable "human factor" will clearly produce something imaginative to assimilate and to profit from this new technology, but many of us are more ambivalent about its advent than Murray. She is doubtless right that "we may not want to acknowledge a connection between ourselves and the mechanical world, but to be alive in our time is to be faced with this reflection, like it or not" (p. 247). In this new computer sport, let's hope that Mind can outsmart Brain enough to beat it at its own game.

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