

## Invisible Belfast

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Abstract:	<p>[in]visible Belfast was a research driven indie alternate reality game (ARG) that ran for 6 weeks during the spring of 2011 in Belfast, and was subsequently adapted, 5 years later into a fictional documentary for BBC Radio 4. The ARG is a participatory and dispersed narrative, which the audience play through. The text expands outwards across both physical and digital platforms to create a mystery for the players using everyday platforms. The ARG is a product of media convergence and at its heart transmedial; defined by its complexity and modes of participation. The fictional radio documentary which remediated the ARG into a more simple linear structure, but possibly a more complex narrative form, retells parts of the story for new audiences.</p> <p>The premise of [in]visible belfast—the game and later the documentary—is itself an adaptation of writer Ciaran Carson’s novel <i>The Star Factory</i> (1997): a postmodern adventure through the complex psychogeography of Belfast. A trail through the labyrinthine text, which paints the history of Belfast in poetic prose. This article will map the concept’s journey from novel to game to radio, contextualising its development within its political and urban landscape; charting the remediation of the narratives as they fold out across multiple media and complex story arches.</p> <p>The article will draw together ideas from previous publications on ARG, Transmediality and complex textualities from the authors, and reflect on the textual trajectories that the remediation of the narrative has taken from the original book, through the ARG, into the radio documentary.</p> <p>Building upon recent approaches from environmental philosopher Tim Morton and games theorist Ian Bogost, the authors argue that Belfast’s history propels medial adaptations of a particular kind, characterised by a ‘flat’ ontology of space and time, and a sort of diffuse and dark urban experience for designers/producers and players/listeners.</p>

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## Introduction

In February 2016, BBC Radio 4 broadcast *Invisible Belfast* (Garrett 2016), a slightly left-field radio documentary in which a young American student starts reading a novel, and ends up lost in the pages of the book and in the city itself.

This concept of an invisible, explorable Belfast existing parallel to the city we see, was drawn most recently from an indie Alternate Reality Game (ARG) produced half a decade before, titled *[in]visible belfast* (Barrios-O'Neill and Hook 2011). In this game, players had to solve mysterious puzzles that were spread across multiple platforms and across the physical city itself, drawing players into the historical and imaginative interstices of the city. This ARG creates a connected but dispersed and nebulous textuality (Hook 2017) where the players work to traverse the text and explore the meanings that it creates. To trace the lineage further back, the game had its roots in the book *The Star Factory* (1997), written by Belfast poet and novelist Ciaran Carson; this is a labyrinthine text which posits the idea of an invisible city underneath the one that is seen: an invisible city which might become visible through playful exploration in which readers can learn and relearn the city (Barrios and Hook 2012). Carson's novel is an interconnected narrative, gesturing continuously at portals between worlds, the text littered with associative links that the reader might follow at will (Barrios 2011).<sup>1</sup> In this article, we (the designers of the game) examine the remediations of the indie game and the radio documentary relative to Carson's novel, paying close attention to what each new medial interpretation of what we refer to as the 'invisible Belfast concept' constrains and affords, or how each remediation shapes what it is possible to perform within its context (Levine 2015). Form arrives not only via the page, screen, interaction or soundwave, but also in the implicit social forms that underlie any expression; with this in mind, we investigate what these processes of remediation might express about the social and political processes at work in Belfast's history. We trace the media genealogy of the invisible Belfast concept as it is presented in the novel, the game and the radio documentary, arguing that Belfast's complex history, including the roles of various media in its conflicts, propels medial adaptations that engage flat ontologies and object-oriented modes of performance. The different texts then are political in differing ways or operationalise the politics of the text and city at different scales and with differing rhythms.

We have adopted the lens of *flat ontology* to make sense of this evolution, both as a way of interpreting the form that each text imposes on Belfast, and as a way of linking this to broader political contexts that have shaped the history of the city. *Flat ontology*, also known as *object-oriented philosophy* (as coined by Graham Harman 1999) and *object-oriented ontology* or OOO (as adapted and developed by Levi Bryant 2009), is a way of conceiving the world from a non-anthropocentric ontological position, rejecting the now-standard Kantian privileging of human existence over that of

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3 other, nonhuman things. OOO philosophers Harman (2010), Bryant (2013) and Bogost (2012) argue,  
4 in a view diverging from a Kantian construction of reality, that objects *do* materially exist  
5 independently of human cognition, and thus should be considered equal to humans, ontologically  
6 speaking. A key component of OOO is a foregrounding of the fundamental relationality between  
7 human and non-human stuff, a fundamental acceptance of the vast networks of systemic physical and  
8 biological relationships governing all objects, in all environments. If we think of our reality in this highly  
9 systemic way, we can also usefully speculate about the lives of objects, which exist at different scales  
10 (from a tin of soup to a transport network) – not anthropomorphically (positing that the object  
11 experiences the world like a human does) but rather by trying to imagine the world as the object lives  
12 it (Bogost 2012:6). This has a certain politics attached: by repositioning our way of thinking about  
13 human experience, OOO entails an ecological rather than hierarchical way of reading reality, in which  
14 everything is network-relational. In this kind of construction, individualism and tribalism become hard  
15 to justify; humans and objects are all made of, and subject to, the same basic materials and physical  
16 processes. Applying OOO, boundaries defining self and other become intensely provisional and  
17 temporary, even meaningless; even invisible. This reorientation, which the invisible Belfast concept  
18 promotes in a variety of ways, allows for new modes of engaging with the visible and invisible spaces  
19 of the city. Harman prescribes such a method for object-oriented literary criticism:

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21 [W]hile many of the literary methods recommended by object-oriented criticism might  
22 already exist, here I would like to propose one that has probably never been tried on as vast  
23 a scale as I would recommend. Namely, the critic might try to show how each text resists  
24 internal holism by attempting various modifications of these texts and seeing what happens.  
25 Instead of just writing about *Moby-Dick*, why not try shortening it to various degrees in order  
26 to discover the point at which it ceases to sound like *Moby-Dick*? Why not imagine it  
27 lengthened even further, or told by a third-person narrator rather than by Ishmael, or  
28 involving a cruise in the opposite direction around the globe? Why not consider a scenario  
29 under which *Pride and Prejudice* were set in upscale Parisian neighborhoods rather than rural  
30 England – could such a text plausibly still be *Pride and Prejudice*? Why not imagine that a letter  
31 by Shelley was actually written by Nietzsche, and consider the resulting consequences and  
32 lack of consequences?

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34 Harman's recommendation is taken from his 2012 essay "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer:  
35 Object-Oriented Literary Criticism". This builds on Heidegger's 'broken hammer', the idea that the  
36 moment an object breaks is the moment it becomes visible to us. This is salient to the aesthetics of  
37 the ARG, which depends upon designers and players 'breaking' and otherwise misusing a variety of  
38 platforms and technologies in order to make an alternate reality visible. This is more or less what we  
39 were up to when we designed our game: without necessarily articulating it as such, we were driven  
40 by the same principles of 'breaking' and remaking the given text. In doing so, its mechanisms and  
41 configurations were made more visible. By working to remediate *The Star Factory*, we looked to  
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3 explore its textual rhythms and how the work operated to map out the real and imagined histories of  
4 the city. The remediations, as they spread further from the original became more unrecognisable: the  
5 text was imagined away from the words on the page and woven through the streets of the city, and  
6 the networked platforms of the internet.  
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10 Bogost has also argued for methods of reading that apply the principles of a flat ontological  
11 view, treating the text as a configurative system composed of units, discrete nodes which both belong  
12 to bigger configurations (as a subway car belongs to a transport network) and also contain their own  
13 configurations (as a subway car contains systems of mechanical parts). These are units or objects at  
14 different scales. A text, by this model, becomes a system or “an arrangement of discrete, interlocking  
15 units” that produce meaning through their performance within a particular arrangement (Bogost  
16 2008:ix). This performance-by-arrangement is not unlike the procedure involved in a chemical  
17 reaction, or in T.S. Eliot’s *objective correlative*, which is itself a sort of poetic algorithm (1920).<sup>2</sup> In this  
18 article, we apply a configural reading to each of these texts, examining how their arrangements play  
19 out in time and space.<sup>3</sup> Starting with Carson’s novel, we analyse the texts to illuminate the non-  
20 hierarchical, ecological processes at work in the environments of Belfast that each text performs.  
21 These alternate layers of the city are textual, digital, material and sonic, and include fictions as well as  
22 the real, lived experience of the city itself. We posit that this kind of reading is invited by Carson’s  
23 original, a text that is thoroughly anti-romantic and non-anthropocentric, that takes a complex view  
24 on realities in which humans and other materials are inextricably entwined, and where things must  
25 be considered at a variety of vast and tiny scales (Barrios-O’Neill 2017).  
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### 37 **Postmodern Novel: *The Star Factory***

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39 Carson’s novel is actually a sort of anti-novel, a spatially-organised treatment of Belfast in  
40 thirty-two parts, that reads more like a magical-realist travelogue or a series of object lessons than a  
41 straightforward novel (Barrios 2011). Each section is named to link it to a space located within the city,  
42 but rarely does the narrative stay bounded in that location; instead, Carson uses the material details  
43 of each space as springboards from which to explore hidden worlds within its cracks. *The Star Factory*  
44 borrows in many ways from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972), and indeed, without constraints of  
45 word count and time, we might have begun this genealogy there or even further back; in Calvino’s  
46 book as in Carson’s, the city appears each time through a different lens of memory or imagination,  
47 and each time manifests characteristics which are distinct and divergent from what came before,  
48 suggesting a universe of possibilities within a single city. Carson has written directly about Calvino and  
49 his representation of urban space, linking it to his own work in his *Self-contained Images and the*  
50 *Invisible Cities of Tokyo* (2012). As such, the city is a system of interconnected humans, objects and  
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3 environments, connected always by the medium of narrative. The urban space, like the human mind,  
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7 inhabited by constellations of such crucial points, whose stars are transformed or regurgitated  
8 into patterns of the everyday. A kitchen interior, for example, is a suitable location, wherein  
9 its panoply of objects ... become hooks on which to hang the items of the story; the room  
10 becomes a virtual embodiment of many stories.

11 (Carson 2012:66-67)

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13 Belfast is thus composed of units – a kitchen, an object within a kitchen – which hang together  
14 in an (external) system of narrative, and at the same time contain (internal) worlds: the narrative  
15 interior of the kitchen, the narrative interior of any object in the kitchen. In the above passage, Carson  
16 reflexively describes a method of storytelling whereby a cloud-like narrative contains countless  
17 possible alternate or alternating planes, accessible by links: here, the object-hooks that suspend  
18 different units of story. The larger structure of the novel suggests that the chosen sites of Belfast serve  
19 too as hooks upon which the narrative is suspended in space, often in the form of seemingly ordinary  
20 objects at first glance.

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22 Carson is known for an almost obsessive attachment to objects, and his novels and poetry  
23 often give close-up views of objects, identifying with them rather intimately: “Stamps bristle with tiny  
24 numbers, minute letters, diminutive leaves and eyes. They are graphic cellular tissue. All this swarms  
25 about and, like lower animals, live on even when mutilated.” (Carson 1997:30-31)<sup>4</sup> Objects are  
26 involved in the inextricable mesh of things moving with us, inside us, around us, and through us, while  
27 we also equally live with, in, around, and through them. As objects are imbued with humanness, the  
28 human is imbued with object-ness: DNA, tissue and swarms, disembodied, robotic, explosive, deeply  
29 material. Material is likewise as capable of knowing us as we are of knowing it: the stamp, “salivated  
30 on by thousands of tongues,” records “vast spectral demographics of deoxyribonucleic acid  
31 chromosome.” (Carson 2012:2065) The living record created through this interchange between  
32 objects and humans (as another form of object<sup>5</sup>) is both map and ever-changing structure, its  
33 dynamics deepened by the infinite unfolding or burrowing away that becomes possible by engaging  
34 specifically through OOO. Following the narrative through the cracks in materiality, “There are holes  
35 within holes” as you chase this story or that one down warren-like pathways, “an intestine maze of  
36 chambers, ante-rooms and corridors” (Carson 1997:131-2).

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38 As Terry Eagleton has argued, an enclosing form can produce a “mythical unity” by which the  
39 form of the text evokes or mirrors a model of social unity (2005). *The Star Factory* is resistant to  
40 totalisation and rejects any novelistic imperative to present a model of social unity (a model which  
41 anyone living in Northern Ireland knows is a fiction). The text generates instead a fractal and multiple  
42 version of the city, precluding as it does the tidy boundaries of linear logic, and any insistence upon  
43 linear causality. Instead, the shape of the text is ecologically networked, demonstrating how “forms  
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3 grapple with themselves ... blossoming from two dimensions into a thought-bubble cycloidal realm ...  
4 nebulous as cloudscapes” (Carson 1997:37). The city is an environment of correspondences that  
5 “seethe everywhere” (Carson 2012:58). This materiality manifests in Carson’s obsessive catalogues of  
6 objects – “tulips, train tickets, electric torches, books of matches, postcards, phonographs, ball-point  
7 pens” (Carson 1997:13). Carson generates inventories that are also living and personal, where every  
8 unique material thing, the “ordinary furnishings” that make up the non-human panorama, has a  
9 history of its own, a world contained, following the OOO imperative of reading an entire world “within  
10 a device” (Bogost 2012:9). At the same time, Carson’s objects repeat fractally, with a single type or  
11 version of an object appearing across the text, and then scattered through his whole body of prose  
12 and poetry, in many facets, again and again. The objects degrade, evolve, indicating their systemic  
13 nature, where even the most complete object is yet a fragment or phase, belonging to a larger  
14 configuration (Barrios-O’Neill 2017). These fragments or versions of repeating objects also become  
15 associative links to countless other places, in and out of the text. These objects include bombs, pens,  
16 scarves, an airplane on a blue sky, a vase of flowers, a Dresden vase, a constellation of stars, a map of  
17 Belfast streets, a van containing a bomb, rusting mechanical parts – the list could go on. Appearing in  
18 numerous and composite forms, they gesture toward a sense of infinite relational networks, a flat  
19 ontological approach to the universe.

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21 In the ecological rather than hierarchical way of reading reality, the politics of OOO and flat  
22 ontology resist/reject imperialist and linear realities (Morton 2013: 17-19). As a result, the very shape  
23 of *The Star Factory*, flat rather than hierarchical, has an embedded politics. This politics is both  
24 avoidant and alternative, disrupting the sovereignty of the top-down view and circumventing the myth  
25 of forward progress that characterises colonising discourse. As a configuration or system, *The Star*  
26 *Factory* gestures at infinite connectivity, infinite relativity, infinite provisionality; there are no identity  
27 politics concerning objective forms, and all things are more or less equal. Critics have often described  
28 Carson’s politics as resistant to spatial domination, with Neal Alexander characterising his orienteering  
29 of the cityscape as implying “a utopian spatial politics,” a Benjaminian resistance to surveillance and  
30 paramilitary terror through the forging of alternative routes. This response to Carson’s work is echoed  
31 in Stainer’s analysis which argues that Carson presents “alternatives to exclusionary sociospatial  
32 identities” (Stainer 2005:380). This alternate-route resistance ultimately produces a game-like quality  
33 in that we orienteer the text as much as we read it, mentally following Carson’s links each time they  
34 appear, tuning in to the ever-expanding network-environment of Belfast that the text subtly  
35 communicates. And while the reader moves forward through the text, this does not always mean they  
36 move chronologically or alphanumerically through the pages; the linearity of storyline is replaced with  
37 an accumulating network of story-bits, or story-units, rendering an environment or storysystem,  
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3 through which the text's/reader's journey is as circuitous as the operations of a natural ecosystem,  
4 with a rhythm almost as visceral.

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6 **Indie Game: *[in]visible belfast***

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8 In *The Star Factory*, Carson poses a reality comprising numerous dynamic relationships among  
9 humans, nonhumans and their environs, casting the city as a theatre of systems (Barrios-O'Neill  
10 2017:1429-30).<sup>6</sup> As game designers, we were inspired to offer more points of entry into this theatre  
11 of systems by reimagining some of its structures within the context of a *playable* system: a game. Thus  
12 *[in]visible belfast* arrived as an indie ARG that remediated the central concept of Carson's novel as we  
13 interpreted it: an adventure through the "collapsing city" of Belfast, poised between layers of reality,  
14 its architecture posing a virtual labyrinth, and its object-laden landscape generating obstacles and  
15 interventions of many kinds (Horton 1999:324). The game lasted six weeks, and invited players to join  
16 a protagonist named Ana in exploring a complex, almost ecological, narrative version of the city, as  
17 she sought out the mysterious entity known only as "[in]visible belfast." To help them on their way,  
18 players were provided with resources: a central website that provided an online base and a place for  
19 players (known inside the games as 'conspirators') to supply answers to puzzles; cryptic messages  
20 posed on various social media from a dark antagonist identifiable only by the moniker "[in]visible  
21 belfast"; clues that could be gleaned from character blogs and social media accounts; occasional  
22 emails delivering puzzles or tasks; and *The Star Factory*. To give an example of how units of the game  
23 played through, at the top of the first email received by players was the logo for *[in]visible belfast*, and  
24 the torn and unlabelled corner of page 47 of *The Star Factory* with sections redacted. In the redacted  
25 material on the page, Carson references the origins of Belfast, naming the year 666 AD. This is  
26 significant to the clue delivered in the email:

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40 *This city is marked with a number, and from this number it grew. This is the start of our tale,*  
41 *as it was the beginning of the city. This number will unlock the door to the maze.*

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43 To progress, players had to identify the book, find page 47 in a normal copy, read the text,  
44 connect it with the clue above, and enter the number 666 into the entry form on the main hub  
45 website. Like the book which inspired the game, the experience had multiple entry points (or 'rabbit  
46 holes'). A second of these was a teaser video shared on social media: in this, the protagonist is  
47 searching for a book on the Pleiades constellation in the university library, and stumbles across a copy  
48 of *The Star Factory* containing a note which is, eerily, addressed to her. This copy of the book becomes  
49 a cypher for the players to help them decode puzzles and understand the invisible layers of the city. A  
50 third entry point came in the form of an interview on BBC Arts Extra, in which the protagonist  
51 explained what she found, and asked the public for help in solving the mystery. The game, as a  
52 performed text, had no singular beginning. The edges to the formal text blurred into the city and the  
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3 network by embracing a core aesthetic of ARGs, known as ‘This Is Not A Game’ (TINAG), which blurs  
4 the fiction of the ARG with the ‘real’ world outside of the game (Hook 2017). With the *[in]visible belfast*  
5 game, we wanted to recreate the experience of the city as a system of interconnected units, and this  
6 reconception of the novel as a game was in part an argument for the post-digital temperament of  
7 Carson’s cloud-like narrative – its constant associative linking, its countless possible alternative routes,  
8 its infinite unfolding that is both playful and networked in the post-digital sense.  
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13 In contemporary convergence culture, every story becomes a possible storyworld and  
14 everything becomes potential fodder for new modes of access. New methods, Henry Jenkins writes,  
15 build consciously “on what has come before, ... offering new points of entry” – our impulse was  
16 perhaps characteristic of this (Jenkins 2006:95). Games are especially well suited to this kind of  
17 project, able to remix fragments and segments of existing narrative into rich, experiential  
18 environments.<sup>7</sup> Our game environment was composite, a multiplatform combination of the actual  
19 Belfast, with players exploring and using various locations in the city itself, and a Carsonian, virtual  
20 version of the city, that we rendered using both his text and our added narrative frame. For the  
21 players, the game became a lens for the city itself. Recurring themes and images from the novel were  
22 woven through the story as recurring and repeating motifs and clues; we tried to stay true to the spirit  
23 of Carson’s original text, but to translate its concept to the real city, in real time. This required us to  
24 depict many Belfasts, on many different scales, from the micro and specific (highly personal histories  
25 of the city, for example, as produced in web forum discussions) to the macro view of the city-as-  
26 process, continually historically and politically reconfiguring itself, composed of and by information.  
27 To help explore this, we wrote our protagonist as an immigrant to the city, seeing through fresh eyes,  
28 but we also gave her a deep personal family history which was entangled in the city’s past through  
29 her father. Ana (the protagonist) is the (invented) daughter of one of Carson’s friends featured in *The*  
30 *Star Factory* novel. This device compounded the complex world-building which slipped in and out of  
31 Belfast as a city, and the pages of Carson’s novel.  
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45 The city is, explicitly for Carson, a signal-processing environment; he describes, for example,  
46 Belfast Central Library as emitting “radio-beacon light-rays”(Carson 1997:176), and the Vatican as a  
47 hub that “picks up the music of the spheres, broadcasting it *urbi et orbi* [to city and world].” (Carson  
48 1997:219). The city for Carson is not just a physical, visible space, but a Hertzian invisible environment.  
49 The city “broadcasts itself” in bits, such that “everything in the city, everything in the world, everything  
50 in the known universe, could be expressed ... Such a system lends itself to all possible forms of graphic,  
51 phonetic, and optical expression” (Carson 2006:171). This is what we hoped to capture and remediate,  
52 and indeed what we felt was invited by the text itself: a new way of expressing the invisible city.  
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3 The game text, like that of the novel, was networked rather than linear, constructed as a  
4 responsive system of connected puzzle chains. As designers of a responsive ARG, much of our time  
5 was spent lurking in forums and watching the chatter of the players, which allowed us to develop each  
6 next phase of the game informed by how players reacted to and solved the previous set of clues (Hook  
7 2017). Its narrative was driven by a refusal (again like that of the novel) of “metaphysical assumptions  
8 about causality in favour of observing linkages between objects, bodies and discourses” (Levine  
9 2015:113). We used the ARG to produce a form that was also a process of unfolding (or burrowing  
10 away) across multiple online platforms, where each new segment of the game provided a cumulative  
11 contribution to the big picture: an opaque number clue given online leads to an address in the actual  
12 city; going there, the player discovers it is the headquarters of a secret society; researching this society  
13 online, the players sees they are putting on an event in town, the nature of which is unclear; attending  
14 this event, the player experiences a live performance which is a Belfast take on the Greek myth of the  
15 ‘Seven Sisters’ (or Pleiades) star cluster, which is a theme of part of Carson’s novel; going to this  
16 section of the novel, they discover another clue; and so on.

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27 A player base of less than two hundred worked collectively to pool individual knowledge and  
28 resources, keeping track of the known quantities on spaces they designed and maintained. This  
29 included two collectively produced player wikis; maps; images of real-space artefacts for sharing; and  
30 a massive accounting of Belfast history as unearthed through collective research online and off. Game  
31 puzzles and artefacts used a combination of media including email, websites, social media messages,  
32 videos, radio broadcasts, street graffiti, dead drops (USB drives embedded in the fabric of the city,  
33 sealed into gaps in walls) and live performances. The TINAG aesthetic of the ARG genre enforced a  
34 constant blurring of boundaries between the game world and the real world, disguising its own  
35 mediation and linking the invisible with the visible. This blurring creates a text without delineated  
36 edges, that has players assisting designers in building an alternate version of reality which takes shape  
37 in real time, and often in real space. This produces a transmedia topology, which comprises the  
38 “ecologies of interaction, participation and creation with and of the text” (Hook, Barrios-O’Neill and Mairs  
39 Dyer 2016:124).

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50 The resulting alternate reality - for which the ARG genre is named - exists entirely within a  
51 transmedia topology of interconnected media artefacts, which are linked in complex ways to each  
52 other and to the real world, producing a multiplatform textual ecology which players must learn to  
53 navigate. As in Carson’s Belfast, “there are holes within holes”, coherences rendered with blocks of  
54 (responsive) narrative. Other designers have compared the unit-based writing approach to the  
55 writing of music, and *storybeats* in the writing of the ARG *Conspiracy for Good*, where the narrative  
56 and puzzles became repeatable and interchangeable units in a wider system (Stenros, Waern,  
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3 Montola, Ollila 2011:2) The game's aesthetic, like that of Carson's novel, was vaguely *noir*, driven by  
4 the sense that players were being "watched, overheard, recorded", that the "deeper you drill down,  
5 the more secrets emerge, all of which can seem at any moment to be the key" (Jenkins 2006:99) and  
6 where "the main protagonists are wont to disappear at any time" (Carson 1997:70). Game players  
7 became escapist from the real city into the virtual and invisible, renegotiating known and  
8 administered versions of Belfast, deepening their comprehension of its complexity as they did so.  
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13 The ARG form could be described as ontologically flattened, defined by a rhizomatic, network-  
14 shaped narrative and also by the interactions of units (players, designers, environment). The infinite-  
15 unfolding/infinite-burrowing dynamic that compels players 'down the rabbit-hole' also makes it  
16 relatively straightforward to integrate objects into the fabric of the game narrative. Physical artefacts  
17 or objects have been central within the ARG genre, from jars of honey which were sent to journalists  
18 as part of the promotion for *I Love Bees* (2004) to mobile phones hidden in birthday cakes in *Why So*  
19 *Serious* (2007). Physical objects are valuable in these contexts because they are a limited resource,  
20 generating knowledge-sharing and collective efforts within the game. Physical artefacts also garner  
21 attention, having a certain archaic cache in the otherwise vastly virtual world of gaming, and forum  
22 conversation revolves around the canonicity of objects within the game, and their relationship to the  
23 reality that has been constructed (Hook, 2017:58). *[in]visible belfast* delivered information via virtual  
24 spaces, but we frequently used physical objects and points in real space to focus attention: an altered  
25 ex-library copy of *The Star Factory*; a network of entryways in North Belfast; a configuration of streets  
26 around the Falls Road; a gravestone in Milltown Cemetery (Barrios-O'Neill and Hook 2016)  
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37 The sprawling shape of the resulting narrative is the precise opposite of the 'well-wrought  
38 urn' of the traditional arts, existing instead as a live/living process that is neither exhaustive (there are  
39 so many possibilities of where the game might have gone, which it did not, making these equally  
40 present and absent – it is an insistently incomplete form) nor principal (the ARG form does not purport  
41 to be the only means of access to its content, built by definition out of composite materials  
42 and infinite borrowings). This kind of configuration reflects the infinite connectivity, infinite relativity,  
43 and infinite provisionality to which Carson's novel gestures, rendering Belfast as a systemic unit in the  
44 Bogostian sense (2012:25), the city a node that comprises numerous systems and also helps to  
45 compose others. The ARG could enact what Carson's text suggests: an active web of narrative  
46 interdependencies, an object-loaded network, an urban space with multiple interactive levels of  
47 operation. With *[in]visible belfast*, we tried to evoke, not just a system, but a complex system,  
48 reflective of the emergent dynamics of collectivity. We aimed to address collectivity of players, of  
49 informational flows, and the complex history of Belfast.<sup>8</sup>  
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The remediation of Carson’s concept from novel to ARG involved adjustments to the affordances and constraints of the multiplatform space and the dynamics of interactivity. The ARG format has an embedded ethos aligned with that of flat ontology, as well as what we might interpret as the embedded politics of *The Star Factory*; the novel, and the game, are resistant to totalisation, to conventional modes of imposing authoritative control, opting instead for something more organic (Jagoda, Gilliam, McDonald, and Sparrow 2017). As in the game, the novel invites the reader to piece the city together herself, from the fragments of an exploded urban consciousness, and thus cultivates a kind of ownership – even for someone who has never been to Belfast – born out of narrative traversal. This is consistent within the broader field of gaming: when the purpose of play is diversion and fun rather than linear progression, games become a sort of flat-ontological approach to problem-solving (Morton, 2016:115). As Tim Morton has written, a “profound political act would be to choose [an] aesthetic construct ... that doesn’t require smoothness and distance and coolness”, but rather insists on the interconnectedness (and thus the lived intimacy) of complex worlds seeping across conceptual boundaries and into our everyday lives (2013:1837). Diversionary world-making, the principal activity of the ARG as well as the activity that distinguishes it from other kinds of games, requires players to employ critical and aesthetic strategies to reframe the city. In *[in]visible belfast*, as players became accustomed to operating within Belfast-as-process, these tropes were overwritten by a sense of moving through and (re)constructing deeper time and a more complex history. This process-aesthetics renders complexity through, on micro-levels, the complex historical positioning of individual objects; and on macro-levels, the pullulating nature of the city, its bigger “formations, explosions and reformations”, the nature of which are not, in the end, particular to Northern Ireland, but are endemic everywhere (Morton 2010:98). Concerned with big networks and big concepts, the ethos of the ARG genre emphasises interdependency and the value of thinking in systems and collectively – making it liberal as a form. Not surprisingly, many ARGs are self-consciously staged and performed, like *[in]visible belfast*, in conflicted spaces or around difficult subjects such as climate change, corporate control, and political governance. The ARG is, finally, a form that is dynamic rather than didactic, eschewing authority in favour of empathy; in *[in]visible belfast*, for example, the only authority figure is the antagonist, and it is the players’ relationship to the protagonist that drives the narrative forward (Barrios and Hook 2011). This ‘forward’ is not linear or competitive, but collective and diffused; players are compelled through a murky space with only provisional boundaries – for example, the space of multi-layered Belfast, which stands in, more broadly, for the troubled concept of territory.

**BBC Radio Documentary: *Invisible Belfast***

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5 BBC radio producer Conor Garrett approached us in 2015 with the aim of developing the  
6 *[in]visible belfast* concept into a documentary for BBC Radio 4. His hope was to achieve the feel of the  
7 game, even if listeners couldn't interact in the same way; in this production, *Invisible Belfast* became  
8 a story of an American student (renamed Danielle), searching the city for the author of a mysterious  
9 note found in a library copy of *The Star Factory* – repeating some of the same plot points found in the  
10 ARG. Danielle's search takes her on a circuitous route through the city, where she meets actual people  
11 from Belfast and is told real stories about their lives in the city. She ultimately locates the source of  
12 the mysterious note, but in the end (as in Carson's novel and in our game), as much is left hidden as  
13 is revealed, as much is made visible as is left invisible.  
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20 In the radio version, Carson and game designer Danielle Barrios-O'Neill play themselves, so to  
21 speak; and in this version passages from the novel are overlaid and intermingle with the framing  
22 narrative. While very different from the game (and the novel) in its format, the radio version does  
23 indeed capture the feel of what preceded it, providing another entry point into the concept of the  
24 invisible city of Belfast.  
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28 As a listened-to piece, the documentary has intimacy and immediacy that are unique to its  
29 format; audio and radio have particular affordances that suit a flat-ontological experience. While it is  
30 definitely not interactive, it approaches a simulation of the listener being on a journey with the  
31 protagonist, "between the adjuncts and intervening avenues of Belfast and Carson's narrative"  
32 (Garrett 2016).<sup>9</sup> Like the written text at the beginning of this folded remediation, audio performances  
33 also have the capacity to create psychological, imagined and invisible spaces that are mysterious and  
34 loaded with potentiality, and can make associational leaps with relative ease. At one point in the  
35 *Invisible Belfast* documentary, a brick salvager on the Shankill Road describes how Belfast brick was  
36 collected from demolished houses in the 1970s; this merges into a passage from *The Star Factory* on  
37 the art of bricklaying; this merges into a conversation Danielle is having with Professor Eamonn  
38 Hughes about the history of destruction and rebuilding that has shaped practically every corner of the  
39 city, giving the lie to the phrase "safe as houses". In the spatial and temporal edit the narrative weaves  
40 and overlaps, drawing these aural worlds into a single, ambilocated imaginative space. At the same  
41 time, audible signals, rather than demarcating a space, gesture toward a plethora of possibilities; radio  
42 drama affords a degree of ontological looseness, where aural cues, and language can make  
43 questionable claims (Barnouw 1947). You don't need anything but sound effects to build a world, but  
44 at the same time you never know whether that world is there or not – a feature that resonates with  
45 the uncertainty of both Carson's text and the TINAG aesthetic of the ARG. Taking a more practical  
46 approach to the same idea, Richard Hand and Mary Traynor have remarked: "There is a peculiar  
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3 dichotomy in audio drama between its *constraints* and its *limitlessness*”, where it has the potential to  
4 “realise anything”. Aural media can represent almost any object or space without the budgetary  
5 implications of producing effects in film or television, for example, where objects must be visually  
6 present. Still, the format demands producers find ways to communicate the environment without  
7 constantly describing it, which is a special challenge in itself (Hand and Traynor 2011:103-105). In this,  
8 there is an ontological verdancy, a fertile and sometimes haunting space where uncertainty is the  
9 main principle. It might even be said that sound has the ability to amplify ontological gaps, and thus  
10 to disrupt the politics of static states by invoking an alternate reality that is fluid, murky, and  
11 fluctuating.  
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At the same time, audio drama is intimate. Whereas a game that migrates and spreads across multiple interfaces on the internet might be alienating for some, a single audio experience that takes place in less than an hour, arriving directly into the ears or into the private space of one’s car, is likely to be more effective at drawing those listeners in. Richard Berry and others have explored how audio producers, particularly within the rise of podcast culture, have developed an intimacy-driven aesthetics, whereby the closeness of the medium (sometimes literally reverberating in the body) and its ability to mimic close, intimate speech, become its defining qualities (Berry 2006:148). This aesthetic was famously exemplified by the radically intimate style of Sarah Koenig of the *Serial* podcast, and reflects not only the technical capacities of the medium, but also the sense of community that surrounded first radio, then podcasts. While radio was historically both reflective and formative of the imagined communities of the nation and national radio’s offspring (not excluding BBC iPlayer, where *Invisible Belfast* is still available) extend these communities according to networks of shared interest, irrespective of location (Berry 2016:666). This multi-located positioning of the digital radio broadcast plays well against the hyperlocal-and-yet-universal Belfast constructed in both Carson’s novel and the *[in]visible belfast* game, making the concept accessible not just via a new medium, but according to new cultural and social formations.

Sound also has the ability to problematise bodily boundaries, another concern of both the book and the game. While reading is visual (distancing and objectifying), hearing has a reputation for being felt and lived, *in time*; we don’t feel vision as we feel sound, and while sight relies on external physical stimuli, sound has broader sensual parameters, linked more closely with touch (Schafer 2009:43). For Marshall McLuhan, the ear “is hyperaesthetic compared to the neutral eye”; the auditory sense is delicate, sensitive, involved: “[i]f we sit and talk in a dark room, words suddenly acquire new meanings and different textures. ... All those gestural qualities that the printed page strips from language come back in the dark, and on the radio” (McLuhan, 1964:303).

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3 And because the auditory experience happens in time, it can produce a more intense,  
4 immediate, seemingly *living* experience than movements across web platforms might. This makes it  
5 possible for the auditory medium to evoke a pervasive, almost physical presence of any aspect of the  
6 storyworld. This pervasiveness is effective in communicating the concept of the invisible city,  
7 humming just under the surface of what is seen. Aural forms have the capacity to express the  
8 permeability of the body by other forces, because sound itself permeates the body in noticeable ways.  
9 There is an irony inherent in these micro-local instantiations of Belfast, as the city is also strange and  
10 global – mediated via global digital radio – even as it permeates the physical body. This models  
11 versions of reality that are contingent upon the embeddedness of the body in systems, and lack of  
12 clear bounds between the self-as-object and the surrounding environment.  
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20 An intimate ‘web of kinship’ that is evoked by the friendly, social and intimate form of radio  
21 might also tap into certain tribal sensitivities, simulating a sort of exclusive involvement specific to this  
22 medium. The effect is no less powerful for the piece being broadcast by the BBC, a cornerstone of  
23 British national identity; in the case of the *Invisible Belfast* documentary, the production is both  
24 Northern Irish and British, subject to the institutional standards and norms of the larger BBC network  
25 while actively pursuing a picture of Belfast that is local and realistic, if overlaid with a fiction (and the  
26 documentary was broadcast on both BBC Radio 4 and Radio Ulster in 2016). The remediation of an  
27 indie game to a radio programme on a major national network presents a certain matrix of problems  
28 around institutionalisation: the ways in which “institutions preserve forms” that may or may not suit  
29 the original concept (Levine 2015:60). Contemporary gaming, after all, emerges through digital  
30 platforms and is shaped by the politics of the internet, which are often purported to be post-national  
31 and post-genre, subverting and often rejecting the cultural forms that came before, including print  
32 and radio. This is directly at odds with Carson’s novel, which is itself subversive to the politics of print  
33 and to national formations, which would appear to make the game a push in the ‘right’ direction –  
34 and might suggest that a turn to national radio would be a step in the wrong one. But things are not  
35 so simple, of course. Radio indeed has a checkered past in Northern Ireland, as it for decades  
36 functioned within the news media as one channel by which to stir up public reaction, and to track and  
37 reproduce sectarian conflict on the ground (Rolston 1991:34).<sup>10</sup> The politics of radio in Ireland’s history  
38 have been continuous with tribal identification and division, a fact that complicates its ability to, even  
39 in the era of digital radio, render a ‘flat’ political landscape: the politics are embedded in the  
40 paternalistic power of the BBC name itself. But the gaming industry, too, is shaped and governed by  
41 dominant political forces in national and global contexts; and the games that result, even when they  
42 manifest formally or philosophically subversive elements, also often serve the interests of major  
43 corporations, with ARGs as no exception. Furthermore, approaching the problematics of post-  
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3 colonisation is undoubtedly less risky with an indie game than with a major radio network production:  
4 indie games, after all, go largely under the radar of public opinion; not so with anything broadcast on  
5 the BBC, which boasts a quarter of a million listeners weekly (Horrocks 2013).  
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8         The question is really whether any of the formal entry points (novel, game, documentary) are  
9 able to express the ethos of the concept they reference. If the game intended to simulate a system,  
10 perhaps the audio version provides a way of ‘tuning in’ to the same system. In the radio version,  
11 various planes of sound impinge upon each other over the course of the piece, creating a listening  
12 experience that is more complex than usual: as voices overlap with other voices, and as passages of  
13 the novel interrupt and emerge from dialogue, the listener is engaged in a noise-sifting project that is  
14 not unlike what one experiences when wandering through an urban space: noticing patterns, sifting  
15 data from static. We can guess that this effect would be amplified if a listener was listening on a mobile  
16 device while moving through an actual city. The narrative of the radio documentary has a clear  
17 beginning, middle and end, making it more linear than either the novel or the game; within its limited  
18 half-hour time frame, it cannot represent as many layers or links to other places and realities, though  
19 it can gesture to them. But despite this limitation, it is extremely effective at recreating the broad  
20 aesthetic of the novel’s traversal of Belfast sites, with its real histories and concrete details; Garrett’s  
21 interviews with real people helped to achieve this. The real stories embedded in the fictional narrative  
22 are also very effective at communicating that this project, if entertaining, is a serious one as well. But  
23 what is most markedly missing from the audio version is the otherworldliness of the city’s layers: “I  
24 cannot help but see”, Carson writes, “bits of Belfast everywhere. Berlin, Warsaw, Tallinn, New York,  
25 to name some, have Belfast aspects [. . .]” (1997)  
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38         It seems possible that a game (even a serious one) is not likely to be taken as seriously as a  
39 radio broadcast (even a partly fictional one), despite how many games take on important political and  
40 social subjects, especially the growing field of serious games.<sup>11</sup> In *Newsgames* (2010), Bogost, Ferrari  
41 and Schweizer discuss the ways in which controversy and games interact, and the degree to which  
42 games can be seen to represent serious or ‘newsworthy’ events. They argue that, as performances of  
43 historical, newsworthy and serious subjects extend to the interactive space in more playable formats,  
44 this will also encourage “new modes of *thinking* about news in addition to new modes of  
45 production”—modes which are more active and involved (Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer 2010:80). At  
46 least superficially, the radio version of *Invisible Belfast* may be able to address the lack of seriousness  
47 that some, rightly or wrongly, attribute to gaming in these contexts. The radio format, or more  
48 accurately, the public’s expectations of the radio format, can possibly afford a level of gravitas and  
49 worthiness, and even social realism, that the field of gaming might not (Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer  
50 2010:63). The problem is that the invisible Belfast concept up to this point has engaged a necessary  
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3 degree of playfulness, having a speculative nature, and critiquing the format of news media as much  
4 as anything. This is especially problematic, as Carson has been particularly critical of the news with his  
5 volume of poetry titled *Breaking News*, which plays with (and ‘breaks’) its formal logics (Barrios  
6 2011:16-19). The radio version attempts to balance this by including both the fictional frame and real  
7 interviews. However, these are easy to tell apart, making this analogue to Carson’s original design less  
8 effective, as we end up with competing realisms – one speculative, one based on real city Belfast  
9 stories – that never converge (Bogost 2012).

### 15 **Conclusion**

16 Elements of flat ontology feature in all three versions of the invisible Belfast concept, with  
17 varying degrees of success. What the radio version backpedals on, and indeed must do in order to  
18 appeal more broadly, is the view of Belfast as always-already post-apocalyptic, formed (like  
19 everything) of endless constructions, explosions, dissolutions, and reconstructions. Belfast cannot be  
20 ‘homey’ in the conventional sense and also uncanny in the OOO sense, and the radio version opts  
21 more for the former, doubtless influenced by the norms and conventions of BBC radio production and  
22 a particular understanding of its audiences. This more ‘homey’ version of Belfast precludes an  
23 ontological wilderness to a large degree. The game, by contrast, is involved in a deep mapping of the  
24 many possible realities of the city, reflecting the spatial turn of representation in the humanities, and  
25 equally linked to expanded applications of informatics to the literary text.<sup>12</sup> That is, the game was  
26 intended to be a move toward the democratisation of knowledge, the flattening of epistemologies  
27 and ontologies, in line with Carson’s own post-political project. It was always more concerned with  
28 void (uncertainty and verdancy) than delineations of any kind. The same cannot necessarily be said of  
29 the BBC documentary, nor is it likely that a listener would be able to fully divorce the content from  
30 the powerful institution of the BBC, which, relative to the political conflict in Northern Ireland, is not  
31 a historically neutral voice (Tierney 2015). As Bill Rolston has pointed out, those whose lives are the  
32 content of the city’s history “may speak or be spoken to, but the framing is still in the hands of the  
33 programme-makers” (Rolston 2007:3). This is truest of the BBC version of the concept, and the least  
34 true in the case of the indie game, where players had active roles in creating the narrative, and were  
35 encouraged to investigate the histories of the many Belfasts on their own terms. This suggests that  
36 the game, though it had the smallest audience of all three versions, had the most potential as a model  
37 for transformational post-conflict art. Yet the radio version still serves as a captivating and productive  
38 entry point to the storysystem; its reach was comparatively massive, and its development was  
39 informed by much the same ethos, despite constraints on the format.

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41 While the complexity expressed in these texts is uniquely of Belfast, it is also microcosmic of  
42 global crises and transformations. These texts, and the shared concept, represent a new position for  
43 art to inhabit, where its composite and unique post-boom, postcolonial, post-conflict matrix of  
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3 conditions has become a precedent for the broader contemporary imagination, rather than  
4 anomalous within it. This can be expressed in valuable ways across a variety of media, which are, in  
5 modern convergence culture, interlinked. The remediated evolution of the concept discussed here is  
6 intensely post-digital: advances in technology allow us to visualise and model our networked political  
7 and creative situations more accurately, and to develop artworks which operate on similar principles.  
8 In turn we are able to unfurl, revealing forms of contingency and precarity that always existed. Belfast,  
9 Ireland, or indeed any 'home', in this context becomes a vulnerable space without simple boundaries,  
10 and without easy distinctions between self and other within that space – a fact sure to be as much a  
11 source of fear as of wonder. Reading art through flat ontologies and object-oriented politics is one  
12 method of favouring wonder over fear in this context, a movement against the violent politics of, as  
13 Morton puts it, "trying to fit a form over everything all at once." (2016:150) Unconvinced of  
14 boundaries, flat ontologies are deeply post-national; OOO's problematising of the illusion of boundary  
15 is promising with regard to the larger project of imagining a future matrix of possibilities for the arts  
16 in Belfast, Ireland, and beyond.  
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<sup>1</sup> We have previously written about the way the [in]visible belfast game was constructed, from an educational perspective; see Danielle Barrios-O'Neill and Alan Hook, "Jumping between the layers: alternate reality games and literature" in *Using Games to Enhance Learning and Teaching: a Beginner's Guide* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Eliot's objective correlative was a concept he developed to describe a particular method by which the poet can produce an affect in the reader, through precise design of the poem and attention to how it performs as a sequence of cues. Eliot describes this as

a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot 1920)

<sup>3</sup>In *Unit Operations* Bogost does a reading of the film *The Terminal* and argues that the film "invites" the viewer to perform a configural analysis, to understand the film as a system. (p 19) The same could easily be said of Carson's novel. For more on object-oriented modes of criticism, see Harman's *The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism*

<sup>4</sup>This language is adopted from *Selected Writings by Walter Benjamin* and is mentioned again in Carson's novel *The Pen Friend* (2009:188).

<sup>5</sup> Within OOO all things, including human and nonhuman animals are objects.

<sup>6</sup>Carson's text frequently "goes beyond the poststructural and beyond the postmodern, by casting texts and human beings as highly dynamic systems, paradoxically aware of our own chaotic structures. This situation is only possible in conversation with the world of communication networks."(Barrios-O'Neill, 2017:1429-1430)

<sup>7</sup> OOO is a form of *speculative realism*, a loose grouping of philosophical approaches that reject Kantian parameters of reality, which are contingent on human cognition alone. Other approaches in this group include eliminative nihilism, cyber-vitalism, and speculative materialism. For more on this, see Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*. Bogost has argued that speculative realism is perhaps best achieved by games (2012:5).

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<sup>8</sup> Bogost links systems theory and OOO using the 'unit' concept, which "finds precedent in systems theory and complexity theory, including applications in biology, cybernetics, chemical engineering, computer science, social theory, and the myriad other domains that seek to explain phenomena as the emergent effects of the autonomous actions of interrelating parts of a system." (2012:25)

<sup>9</sup> Text from the BBC website description of the programme. The full description:

We all like to get lost in a book - but when Danielle, an American visitor to Belfast, stumbles upon a mysterious handwritten note in a 2nd hand copy of Ciaran Carson's novel *The Star Factory* - she finds herself on a labyrinthine journey through his prose and through the hidden side-roads and alleyways of the city.

As she searches for the elusive Irish author and poet, it soon becomes clear that there's much more to Belfast than meets the eye. This is a city that regenerates itself through layers of history and memory where the main protagonists are want to disappear at any time.

Between the adjuncts and intervening avenues of Belfast and Carson's narrative, Danielle realises she can't read the city like a book as it will always exceed the confines of the pages...

<sup>10</sup>. The role of radio in stoking conflict has been well documented in Rwanda, Bosnia and elsewhere; as a result, "the modernization and professionalization of the media are often essential elements of reconstruction in war-torn societies." Rolston (2007:344).

<sup>11</sup> *Serious games* are a growing category of games that take on real social issues, often with the goal of cultivating real-world impacts. Bypassing the simplistic fallacy of games you can win, serious games often attempt to avoid the reductiveness of 'winning' or 'losing' and present reality in more cyclical and systemic ways. Serious games often seek to obfuscate differentiation between the realm of the real and the game-world, allowing the problematics of the real world to become a kind of immersive experience..

<sup>12</sup> We borrow 'deep mapping' from Selina Springett, who examines this practice of as a consciously performative act connected with the 'flattening' of knowledge systems (2015).