

Blog Fiction: The Relational Poetics of a Distributed Narrative Form

by

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Abstract

This analysis explores blog fiction as a distributed narrative form, and the relational nature of the reading and writing processes that shape its poetics. It does this primarily through the analysis of *Bad Influences*¹, the blog fiction that forms the creative part of this thesis.

Bad Influences tells a disaster story distributed over four separate fictional blogs, exploring online identities, friendships, and how our relations to the world and our communities are shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves. Jill Walker Rettberg's ideas on distributed narrative² are used to investigate blog fiction's distributions in time, space and authorship, and how these affect its narrative time, linearity, interactivity and poetics. The processes of writing and posting *Bad Influences*, and engaging with its readers, show how the use of the blog as a medium determines the characteristics of blog fiction as a form, and how the relations that emerge between readers, writers and the text produce, in Aukje van Rooden's term, a relational poetics.³

This analysis concludes with an application of relational poetics to blog fiction and digital interactive fiction in general, touching upon emerging forms of fiction on social media platforms (e.g. Twitter fiction and interactive multiplayer narrative apps), in which relational processes are an essential component of the text, rather than simply a means to its access.

Key Words: blog fiction, digital fiction, digital literature, distributed narrative, relational poetics, new media, hypertext, interactive fiction, collaborative fiction, epistolary.

¹ Emma Segar, *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 5th January to 8th December 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk>> [accessed 08-06-2014].

² Jill Walker, 'Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks' in *IR 5.0* held by Association of Internet Researchers at Brighton (21 September 2004) <<http://jilltxt.net/txt/Walker-AoIR-3500words.pdf>> [03-06-2015].

³ Aukje van Rooden, 'Relational Poetics: Towards A Reevaluation of The Literary Within Cultural Studies' in *Current Issues in European Cultural Studies* held by Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS) at Norrköping (15 June 2011).

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Introduction

*Bad Influences*¹ is a blog fiction, telling a disaster story distributed over four separate fictional blogs, exploring online identities, friendships, and how our relations to the world and our communities are shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves. Through the process of writing, posting and engaging with the readers of *Bad Influences*, I investigated how the use of the blog as a medium determines the characteristics of blog fiction as a form, and how the relations that emerge between readers, writers and the text shape its poetics.

The disaster genre has particular relevance to the blog fiction form, as it brings with it themes that lend themselves to fragmented narratives: modes of communication and their mediating effect on our relations to one another and to our environment. Disaster fiction has always been concerned with tensions between the individual and society, and with the ways in which small groups cohere or collapse under physical threat and social upheaval, with this process often used as a metaphor for the fracturing and reshaping of society itself. Disaster fiction has at its core a tension between the social and the personal, exploring the potentially positive and negative outcomes of a sudden, heightened sense of self-reliance or reliance on others. The nature of the viewpoint character is important to the expression of these themes. Classic novels in the western disaster tradition tended to focus thematically on broad, societal critiques (e.g. decadence, complacency and lack of social cohesion) and were not excessively interested in the personal losses or inner emotional lives of their protagonists. This is not to say that they did not relate personal and harrowing stories, but often at a distance, pretending to a balanced report of events. Protagonists of the definitive disasters of the late 19th to mid 20th Century (e.g. H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* and John Christopher's *The Death of Grass*) may have emotional responses to their situation, but it is not particularly important how they *feel* about the collapse of society, only that they focalise the events reliably. The almost invariably male, white, middle-class, socially conventional narrator embodies neutrality and pretends to an objective viewpoint. While, of course, this *is* a specific identity and viewpoint – one that is shared by the vast majority of those with social status and power – it is, for this reason, an invisible one, and so

¹ Emma Segar, *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 5th January to 8th December 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk>> [accessed 08-06-2014].

the narrator's perceived lack of specific identity or personal involvement imbues the account with credibility as social commentary.

In contrast, contemporary disaster fiction tends towards focalisers who have some personal reason to be particularly affected by the disaster, or who make important decisions regarding it. It is the internal, emotional and cerebral narrative of the protagonist that is the focus of contemporary disasters such as Meyerson's *Then*, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Rogers' *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*. Where a broader view is presented, it is through a range of viewpoints, rather than a pretence to neutrality through any one focaliser (e.g. Brooks' *World War Z*, Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*.) Each viewpoint remains unique, specific and, by the nature of its specificity, unreliable for drawing broader social conclusions. Conclusions may be implicit in the experiences of each protagonist, but in contrast to the classic disasters it is their emotional response, not their social analysis, that stands out from the narration. Rather than presenting their conclusions on the collapse of society, each survivor relates only their own, personal apocalypse, so that instead of a distant intellectual critique the reader is drawn into emotional sympathy with the protagonist. As Dave Bailey says of his story *The End of the World As We Know It*:

We don't need the destruction of entire cities to know what it's like to survive a catastrophe. Whenever we lose someone we love deeply we experience the end of the world as we know it. The central idea of the story is not merely that the apocalypse is coming, but that it's coming for you. And there's nothing you can do to avoid it.²

The highly individualised ways that we communicate and present ourselves online are symptomatic of this focus on the personal story, making the blog the ideal medium for representing isolated viewpoints, even within what may seem – on the surface – a highly social practice. Confessional and frank, yet unyielding and unreceptive to contradiction, bloggers seek connection while being held back from it by the personas in which they become invested.³ *Bad Influences* is the story of four people overcoming their own atomisation and fear of exposure, to escape the

² John Joseph Adams, (Ed.), *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse* (Canada: Night Shade Books, 2008), p.283.

³ Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), pp.118-119.

identities they have created for themselves in the hope of making true connections in the new societies that await them. This is a continuation of trends within disaster fiction. Having moved from societal themes focalised through neutral protagonists through concentration on the personal apocalypse of significant narrators, there is an emerging tendency towards the exploration of the atomised viewpoint in search of identity and community, whether through multiple-viewpoint narratives (Coupland's *Player One*) or an anonymous single narrator whose identity is not as important as their story (McCarthy's *The Road*, Hall's *The Carhullan Army*.)

An apocalypse is the perfect scenario through which to explore the group dynamics of online relationships, the ambiguous intimacies and antagonisms that the medium provokes. *Bad Influences* uses multiple blogs to shift focalisation and present conflicting viewpoints and their interactions. This allows for a re-imagining of the disaster fiction trope of the survivors' group as microcosm of societal collapse, from strangers thrown together by disaster to friends kept apart by it, relying on one another through a virtual community. Groups of bloggers can be geographically distant while maintaining strong social connections. Bloggers form communities in order to connect and communicate with others, but do so at a remove. Walker describes this tendency using Viviane Serfaty's characterisation of blogs as 'mirrors and veils':⁴

Just as we study ourselves in a mirror, shaping our features so our reflections please us, so we create a reflection of ourselves in a weblog. At the same time, we use our blogs to veil ourselves, not telling all but presenting only certain carefully selected aspects of our selves to our readers.⁵

Bloggers communicate in the guise of carefully constructed personae, chiselled down to the facets they want the world to see and embellished with the traits they aspire to. These personae may be essential in giving some bloggers the confidence, or anonymity, to feel that they can safely participate in a public

⁴ Viviane Serfaty, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs*, Amsterdam Monographs in American Studies (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2004).

⁵ Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, p.120.

conversation, but they may also stand in the way of genuinely intimate connections.⁶

Blogs are a contradictory social phenomenon: at once diary and memoir, intimate and self-conscious, revealing and concealing. In *Bad Influences*, the interactions of the characters through their blogs, highly personal yet highly public spaces, demonstrate the ways in which their camaraderie provides a sense of community that insulates them from the world around them while they remain isolated from one another. The individualism inherent in the medium and culture of blogging holds them back from the connections they crave, except within the moments of crisis that allow them to break through the self-conscious nature of the medium, reveal themselves as they are and allow themselves to influence and be influenced.

By combining real-time serialisation and interactivity, *Bad Influences* draws the reader into these social relations, offering varying levels of immersion. The reader can be involved explicitly, through commentary on the characters' blogs, or find themselves implicitly within the storyworld through the nature of following a text that occupies the same physical and temporal spaces materially as it does diegetically (that is, the readers read the posts online, as they appear in real time, just as the characters are implied to do within the story.)⁷ This distribution of the text in terms of time (through serialisation), space (through separate blogs, posts and comments) and authorship (either in terms of creators or participants within the comments) makes blog fiction a definitive example of distributed narrative,⁸ an analysis in which Walker Rettberg applies a reversal of Aristotle's unities, seeking new forms of narrative unity in the ways that the reader accesses fragmented texts:

As a starting point, let's imagine a three-point description of the ways in which a narrative can lack unity, reversing Aristotle's dramatic unities

⁶ Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, p.121.

⁷ Or almost. *Bad Influences* was posted in 2013, despite the events taking place in 2026, but other than the year the dates and times are accurate, so that the time passing for the characters reflects the time passing for the readers for the duration of the story.

⁸ Jill Walker Rettberg, 'Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks' in *IR 5.0* held by Association of Internet Researchers at Brighton (21 September 2004) <<http://jilltxt.net/txt/Walker-AoIR-3500words.pdf>> [03-06-2015].

while concentrating mainly on the form of the narrative. The unity of time could then translate to distribution in time:

1. Distribution in Time: The narrative cannot be experienced in one consecutive period of time.

The unity of space can similarly be converted into distribution in space:

2. Distribution in Space: There is no single place in which the whole narrative can be experienced.

For the third, let's try following Foucault's argument that the notion of a distinct author, or group of authors, is a precondition of our idea of a whole work (Foucault 1988), and see what happens if we think about narratives in which authorship itself is distributed. That leaves us with:

3. Distribution of Authorship: No single author or group of authors can have complete control of form of the narrative.⁹

I have used the three forms of distribution that Walker Rettberg identifies to categorise the formal properties of blog fiction in the three main chapters of this analysis. Following an explanation of the methodologies, aims and background of the project, the second chapter will discuss the effects of the real-time narration that is brought about by a live blog fiction's distribution in time. The third chapter looks at how blog fiction's distributions in space, once serialisation is complete, allow for differing reading orders that can significantly affect themes and conclusions. The fourth chapter explores various forms of interactivity, within and surrounding a blog fiction, and how these distribute authorship and implied authorship. Each of these narrative distributions work to build a relational poetics – a form of understanding narrative that relies not only on the reader's personal relation to the text and its themes but to their interaction with the text, their access to it, and the two-way influence between the text and their own choices and ideas regarding it. This relational poetics, and its application to other emerging narrative forms, is the subject of chapter 5.

⁹ Walker Rettberg, 'Distributed Narrative', p.3.

Chapter 1

Methodology and Background

Practice-led Research

This thesis is a work of practice-led research, using a focus on the processes and outcomes of creating *Bad Influences* to analyse blog fiction as a form: how it is written, how it is read, and the ways in which its distributions in time, space and authorship bring about the relations that shape its poetics.

The National Association of Writers in Education says of Practice-led research in Creative Writing:

[...] the simple definition is: that the creative writer will undertake this research through the act of creating; that they will invest knowledge and understanding into this practice, and that they will develop their knowledge and understanding through their practice. The results of this practice-led research will demonstrate this knowledge and understanding.¹⁰

This can encompass a range of methodologies that centre around creative practices and the analysis of those practices. In *Faerwhile and the Multimodal Creative Practice*, R. Lyle Skains says of practice-led research that it 'connotes a focused project, a creative experiment designed to answer questions about the process and results of the practice itself.'¹¹ This summary is useful, as it is applicable to any creative practice, while much of the analysis on practice-led research centres on art and design, and must be applied to creative writing with some thought as to its specific characteristics. Christopher Frayling categorises practice-led research as:

- Research into art and design
- Research through art and design

¹⁰ NAWE Higher Education Committee, 'Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement' (October 2008) <<http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/research.html>> [14-03-2016] (p.11).

¹¹ R. Lyle Skains, *Færwhile & the Multimodal Creative Practice: Composing Fiction from Analogue to Digital* (Bangor: Bangor University, 2013), p.121.

- Research for art and design¹²

To adapt his explanations of these terms to writing, research into Art and Design could become literary criticism, studying the works of writers in themselves and in their social and historical context; or it could become narratology, the study of the mechanics of narrative. Research through art and design becomes research through the practice of creative writing: poetics, writers' self-analysis of the processes by and through which we create, or by which we learn to create and discover how to get better at creating. Research for art and design becomes research needed for the writing itself – research into the background of a setting or character, the kind of research that is not showcased in a separate thesis but is subsumed into the work produced.

These are all highly applicable to this research project, which is, at one and the same time, an investigation of the characteristics of blog fiction (examination and criticism of existing works), a study of its formal mechanics (narratological analysis) and an experiment in its creation (creative writing). It is perhaps misleading to place them this way around, though, as if they lead to one another in that order. In fact, first came the idea to write a blog fiction, then the investigation into existing blog fiction and literature on blog fiction, then some research into character background and setting, then some writing, then some poetics observing that process in the form of a research blog,¹³ then some research into narratology and narratological analysis of blog fiction, then some more writing etc. It would be tidier to construct the narrative of this research project through a theory of writing as a linear process, in which there is initial preparatory research, then practical writing, then analysis of the writing process in light of the research. However, the truth is that the processes are far too interdependent and reciprocal to be so neatly separated. As Joyce Yee says of Frayling's analysis:

I would argue that these types of research are not mutually exclusive. For example, Pedgley's (1999) PhD was to study designers' attention to materials and manufacturing processes (a study into the design

¹² Christopher Frayling, 'Research in Art and Design', *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1.1 (1993), pp.1-5 (p.5).

¹³ Emma Segar, *Under the Influence* [blog article], 11 February 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk/2013/02/11/reflections-on-time/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

processes) by designing and prototyping an innovative polymer acoustic guitar (through the practice). While Hillier's (2006) PhD uses typographic practice as part of the research process to identify, design, and test the readability and legibility issues of a new typeface.¹⁴

I found that in writing, too, there is a great deal of overlap and reciprocity between Frayling's categories of practice-led research. There is much in the analytical part of this thesis which I obviously could not have known until I had had the practical experience of writing, posting and interacting with the readers of a blog fiction. But equally, there is much of that blog fiction that I may not have written as I did without the knowledge that my analysis would involve the narratology of time, the nature of real-time serialisation and the effects that this would have on how the story is read and how the readers interact with it. In fact, much editing and re-writing took place after I realised that the story would have to be more interactive than I had initially envisaged; yet more followed the process of posting, interacting with readers and seeing their commentary and analysis of the story so far, and their speculations on where it might go.

In a work of poetics, of research through reflection on writing processes, the writer is both the observer and the observed, and if the research is practice-led, the practice is also research-led. This is not because a creative work for the purpose of research warrants a process less free or creative than one produced outside of the academy, but because free, creative works are *always* the product of multiple implicit, explicit, conscious and unconscious objectives, both in terms of the writer's own interests, the social context in which they are written and the constraints of the form and tradition of the work. As NAWE's Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement says:

Creative Writing is research in its own right. All Creative Writing involves research in Creative Writing whereby experience is transmuted into language [...].¹⁵

¹⁴ Joyce S. R. Yee, 'Methodological Innovation in Practice-Based Design Doctorates', *Journal of Research Practice*, 6.2 (2010), pp.1-23 (p.3).

¹⁵ NAWE Higher Education Committee, 'Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement' (p.13).

Each aspect of research-led practical work, then, changes and influences the other aspects, during, after and even before conscious observation and analysis. To clarify this in terms of my processes: I did not write this analytical thesis until *Bad Influences* had been completed, posted and declared finished, but I did write much of the material that would feed into this analysis in note form and in blog form, some of it while writing the draft of *Bad Influences*, some while posting, some when I had only just had the idea for the story, based on pure speculation of what the process would be like. Much of this material was rejected, but its influence remains in the conclusions I reached through its rejection. My reading of narratology and of discussions of blog fiction and digital fiction in academic contexts and on discussion fora also fed back into both the creative and analytical writing processes. This chaotic process was brought together by the research aims, what Robin Nelson describes as a 'clew':

Particularly in the context of PaR [Practice as Research] examination or audit, it is helpful for the assessor to be given in writing a 'clue' ('clew') as to the research inquiry. In the modern form of the word, a 'clue' in writing is useful in PaR since the research inquiry is not identical to the practice, though it is evidenced by it. The old form of the word, 'clew', literally denotes a thread, and students have found it to be a productive metaphor for holding on to the line of the research inquiry as it weaves through the overall process.¹⁶

While I could not constantly document all knowledge gained through the writing and background reading processes, I could hold onto the thread of what aspects of the planning, writing, reception and interaction were specific to blog fiction, and were therefore relevant to the poetics I knew I would later be formulating from the practice. In this way, my analytical writing, my background reading, and my writing of *Bad Influences* rotated in their prominence, in an unsteady orbit, sometimes focused on the creative writing, sometimes on narratological analysis, sometimes on criticism or poetics, until, at the end of posting, they reached a stable enough oscillation for me to be able to capture them in the form of a thesis that centred relational poetics as the unifying theme emerging from each of my methodological approaches.

¹⁶ Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies and Resistances* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.10.

These methodologies, then, were creative writing composition (*Bad Influences* itself), poetics ('the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing')¹⁷ and narratology ('the theory of narrative').¹⁸ While the composition is the practice on which I am reflecting, and the poetics the reflection and the identification of the processes involved in that particular composition, my focus on the formal features of blog fiction – those features which not only define it as digital, serialised, epistolary, interactive etc., but also distinguish it from other forms of digital or serialised or epistolary or interactive fiction – broaden that reflection into an attempt not just to define my own poetics or those of *Bad Influences*, but those of blog fiction generally. Having established the relational nature of this poetics, it is possible to then identify other digital and distributed forms that have a relational poetics, and from there to speculate on the development of the form. I made a great many of these observations on the formal properties of blog fiction through narratological analysis, particularly regarding narrative time, in order to identify the structural aspects of blog fiction narratives that differ from those of other prose writing. Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* explains that:

Narratology studies the nature, form, and functioning of narrative [...] More particularly, it examines what all and only narratives have in common (at the level of STORY, NARRATING, and their relations) as well as what enables them to be different from one another, and it attempts to account for the ability to produce and understand them.¹⁹

Narratology is at the other end of the analytical spectrum to poetics. Among the many definitions in 'The Necessity of Poetics', Robert Sheppard includes 'Poetics is a speculative discourse, not a descriptive one' and 'When poetics stops it becomes theory, retrospective rather than speculative, definitive rather than open

¹⁷ Robert Sheppard, 'The Necessity of Poetics', *Pores: A Journal of Poetics Research*, 1.1 (October 2001)

<<http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/1/Robert%20Sheppard,%20The%20Necessity%20of%20Poetics'.htm>> [accessed 09-03-2016]

¹⁸ Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, Revised edn. (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p.66.

¹⁹ Prince, p.66.

to infinitude.²⁰ Narratology deals with much of the same subject matter, but from a very different and decidedly theoretical perspective. When Mieke Bal, in *An Introduction to Narratology*, speaks of the ordering of narratological 'elements' (events, actors, time etc.) into a story, she says:

These processes are not to be confused with the author's activity – it is both impossible and useless to generalize about the latter. The principles of ordering which are described here have a hypothetical status only, and their purpose is to make possible a description of the way content material comes across in the story.²¹

Narratology is not reflective of practice and does not deal with creative processes. It is structural, descriptive and scientific, using observation and analysis of the existing body of literature to formulate and test universal narrative laws. Nevertheless, I did find this study of narrative structure and form useful to my reflections and to establishing the poetics of blog fiction. Narratology is perhaps of particular use to writers who work in unusual styles or emerging forms, as a good knowledge of narratology can tell us precisely which rules we are breaking. This is not to indulge contrarianism or assert a special originality, but serves a very practical purpose. To know the rules is to know *why* those rules were formulated, why and how narrative works as it does, so that when we try to make it work differently we know what functions we must do without, and can consider how to either replace them or compensate for their absence with some new element that could not be achieved within those rules, and yet also brings something worthwhile to the narrative in its own right. In applying narratological rules to emerging forms, we find exceptions that do not invalidate narratology but expand it. I used theories of narratology (e.g. anachrony) to establish what blog fiction could not do, that other prose forms can (e.g. extradiegetic prolepsis, discreet ellipsis) and thereby to discover what it can do, that other prose forms cannot (e.g. tangible, real-time ellipsis and analepsis). We will come to this analysis in more detail in Chapter 2.

²⁰ Sheppard,
<<http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/1/Robert%20Sheppard,%20The%20Necessity%20of%20Poetics'.htm>
> [accessed 09-03-2016]

²¹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*, 3rd edn. (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p.8.

However, in order to discover the distinct formal properties of blog fiction, it was first necessary to define it. The remainder of this chapter discusses the existing analyses and definitions of blog fiction and explains some of the terminology I will use to describe it, as well as investigating the history of blog fiction as a form and touching upon that of its medium, the blog.

Definitions of blog fiction

In *Blogging*, Jill Walker Rettberg defines the blog as 'a frequently updated Web site consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first',²² and points out certain formal and structural properties that are common to most blogs, including 'timestamps, post titles, the blogroll, the 'about me' page and so on.'²³ Other features that are expected of blogging tools include a form on each post inviting readers to comment, the option for bloggers to insert other media into their posts, the facility to customise the appearance of the blog, and syndication: the provision of a feed through which to subscribe to the blog and read posts through alternative platforms, such as Microsoft Outlook or Feedly, or to embed blog posts into other media. Walker Rettberg talks of the blog as being either a medium or a genre, depending on perspective, and identifies several genres within blogging (diary-style blogs, political blogs etc.)²⁴ Blog fiction could be counted among these genres, though it will make more sense for a study limited to fictional blogs to refer to genres of fiction (science fiction, horror etc.) and to define blogs as a medium that these fictional texts may use. Blog fiction is therefore a form of literature whose properties include using blogs as a medium.

To clarify this definition, it is useful to look at previous attempts to define and categorise the blog fiction form. While blog fiction has been mentioned in passing by several academics in the fields of new media and digital writing, there is little analysis that concentrates specifically on openly fictional epistolary blogs. Amongst fictional stories published on blogs, there are those that acknowledge and use the features of the blog medium in ways that are integral to the text, affecting its formal characteristics, and those that use it merely as a publishing tool

²² Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, p.19.

²³ Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, p.19.

²⁴ Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, pp.20-21.

for traditionally-structured novels or short stories. While there is interest in this use of blogs for the democratisation of publishing, it is only epistolary blog fiction that is of interest to me, as this uses the structural properties of the blog textually. The chapter on 'Blogs as Narratives' in Walker Rettberg's *Bloggging* is concerned primarily with the narrative elements inherent in non-fictional blogs, while Tim Wright's 2004 article 'Blog Fiction' in *Trace* deals with ambiguity between the real and fictional in narrative blogs. There are some very relevant analyses and examples in blog fiction writers' blogs (e.g. Mark Barrett's *Ditchwalk* and Diego Doval's *Plan B: A Blognovel*), academic blogs (Jill Walker Rettberg's *jill/txt* and the group blog *Grand Text Auto*) and academic sources that deal with hypertext and electronic literature in more general terms (e.g. Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, J. Yellowlees Douglas' *The End of Books or Books Without End* and Bell, Ensslin and Rustad's *Analyzing Digital Fiction*). However, for definitions and in-depth analysis specifically of the explicitly fictional, epistolary blog fiction that is relevant here, there are only three significant sources: Angela Thomas' 'Fictional Blogs' (a chapter in the collection *Uses of Blogs*), Betsy Friedrich's *Fictional Blogs: How Digital Narratives are Changing the Way We Read and Write* (an undergraduate dissertation) and Dustin Mineau's *Blog Fiction* (a blog on fictional blogs that was active from 2007 to 2010).

Of these, Mineau's blog provides the most comprehensive categorisations of the blog fiction form. His blog (now inactive, though still accessible at <http://www.snowcow.com>), remains an essential online source, archiving many reviews of blog fictions that flourished throughout the form's peak period of popularity, many of which have subsequently disappeared. Mineau reviewed, discussed and analysed blog fiction, creating a Wordpress widget²⁵ to list active blog fiction and, after much discussion with other readers and writers, coining a concise definition:

Blog Fiction: (noun) Serialized literature published to a blog that is written in a diary format. Often, but not necessarily, the fictional writer of the blog will interact with its readers.²⁶

²⁵ Mineau, 'Blog Fiction Widget Release', *Blog Fiction* [blog], 9th January 2008 <<http://blog.blogfiction.org/2008/09/blog-fiction-widget-release.html>> [accessed 09-01-2008].

²⁶ Mineau, 'Blog Fiction defined', *Blog Fiction* [blog], 27th August 2008 <<http://blog.blogfiction.org/2008/08/blog-fiction-defined.html>> [accessed 27-12-2008].

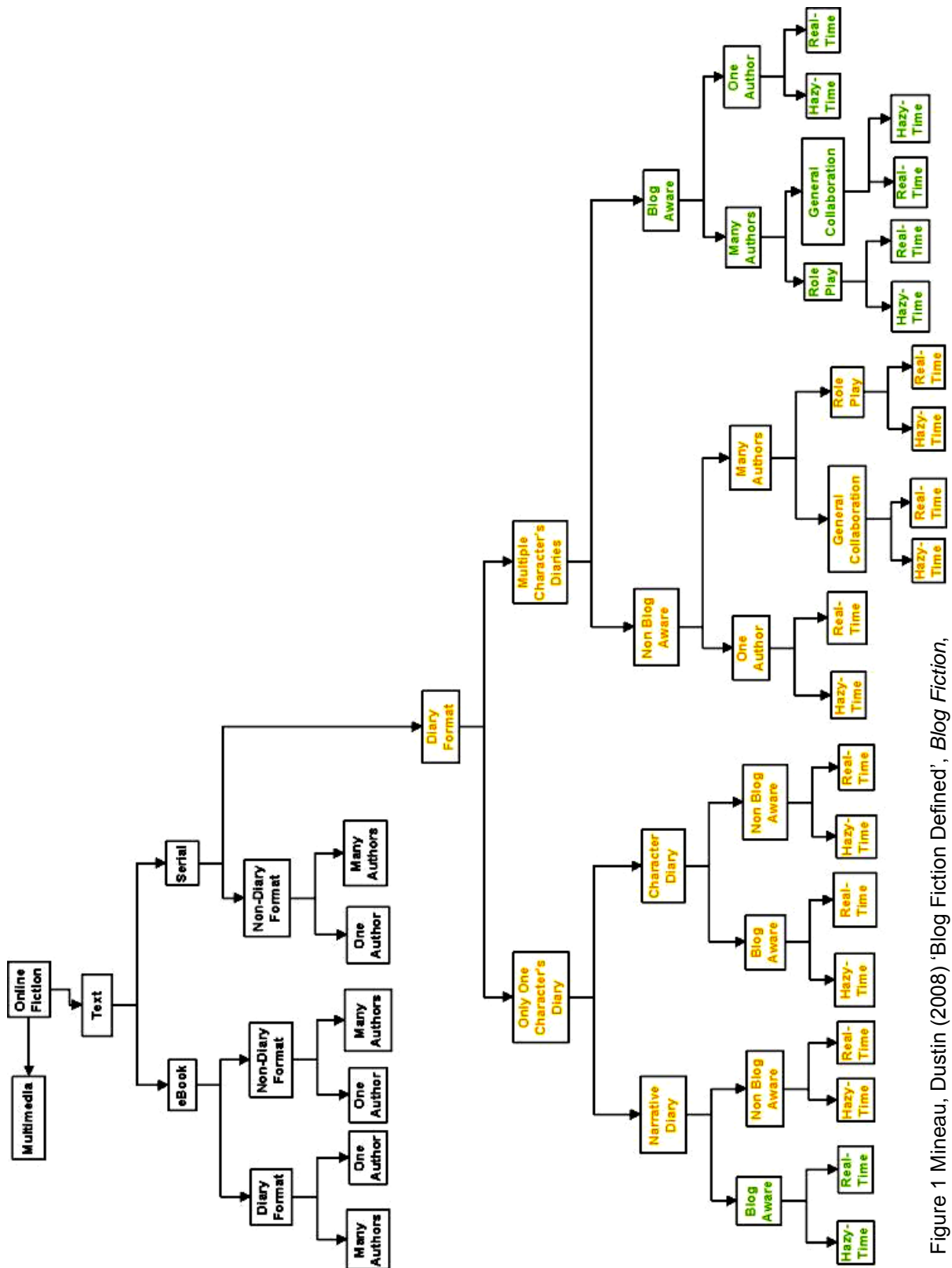


Figure 1 Mineau, Dustin (2008) 'Blog Fiction Defined', *Blog Fiction*,
 <<http://www.snowcow.com/writing/blog-fiction-defined/>>

He also created a comprehensive classification chart (figure 1), differentiating between text-based online fiction as a broad category (shown in black writing), blog fiction (orange) as a sub-category, and the blog novel as a sub-category of blog fiction (green).

This is still a useful classification, though some aspects of the terminology have become outdated. Since the proliferation of e-readers, the term 'e-book' has taken on a more specific meaning, and few would use it to describe all fictional narratives published online without serialisation. Mineau also uses the term 'blog novel' to describe blog fiction that is written specifically as a character or characters' blogs (as opposed to an epistolary narrative in some other form of diary or log). This term²⁷ does not seem to suggest the distinction that Mineau is making. If anything, this category of blog fiction is the furthest from resembling the novel as a form. 'Blog novel' would more intuitively suggest texts that may fall on the right hand branch of the black section of Mineau's chart: non-epistolary fictional works of novel length, serialised on a blog but structured as traditional novels, usually in chapters, so that the blog acts as publishing medium only and does not significantly influence form.

In spite of these quibbles with terminology, Mineau's chart and the detailed commentary accompanying it are invaluable for exploring and defining the structural options within blog fiction, and the variety of form that emerges through use of distinct features of the blog (e.g. narrative vs. character blogs, one character vs. many characters, real-time vs. hazy-time).²⁸ By Mineau's chart, *Bad Influences* is a text-based, serialised, diary-format, multiple-character, blog aware, single author, real-time blog novel (as a sub-category of blog fiction). It is notable in following this progression that the point at which an online fiction becomes blog fiction is its combination of serialisation with epistolary (or 'diary format', in Mineau's chart). This has great significance for the poetics of blog fiction, as it is the combination of these elements that creates the potential for real-time narration. I will expand on the importance of this to *Bad Influences*, and to blog fiction generally, in Chapter 2.

Mineau's chart is acknowledged as an expansion upon Angela Thomas' Typology

²⁷ Probably taken from Diego Doval's *Plan B: a blognovel*, the first fully fledged (if not so named) blog fiction, discussed later in this introduction. (Diego Doval, *Plan B: a blognovel* [blog fiction], 2002 <<http://www.dynamicobjects.com/d2r/planb/archives/2004/03/one.html>> [accessed 08-06-2014].)

²⁸ Dustin Mineau, 'Blog Fiction defined', *Blog Fiction* [blog], 27th August 2008 <<http://blog.blogfiction.org/2008/08/blog-fiction-defined.html>> [accessed 27-12-2008].

of Blog Fiction (figure 2, below) used in 'Fictional Blogs',²⁹ the first academic analysis to define and categorise blog fiction:

A fictional blog can be defined as any form of narrative that is written and published through a blog, LiveJournal, or other similar online Web journal.³⁰

| Typology of Blog Fiction | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| BLOG USED AS A PUBLISHING TOOL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using the blog or journal as a means of publishing writing • these may be original works (<i>Entia</i>⁸) • some people have blogged novels that are written in diary form (such as Mary Shelley's <i>Frankenstein</i>) as a form of online reading group (<i>Dracula Blogged</i>⁹) | BLOG USED AS A WRITING TOOL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using the blog as a writing device, taking into account and manipulating various or all of the features of a blog: hyperlinks, images, the comment feature, and so on | | | |
| | Contained Story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the story world is contained within the blog itself (<i>The Glass House</i>¹⁰) | Partial Story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the story world is only partially represented through the blog, and is attached to a forum or other community, often a fan fiction community | | |
| | | Interactive Role-Playing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • this interactive blogging resembles role-playing games, but there are some sets of blogs that link to the role-playing forum as part of the storytelling (<i>Providence</i>¹¹) | Character Diary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blogs or journals that are told from a character's perspective, used either to create back story or to integrate within fiction or nonfiction from outside the blogosphere. | |
| | | Fictional Source (<i>Buffy the Slayer</i> ¹²) | Nonfiction Source (<i>Bloggus Caesari</i> ¹³) | |
| FICTIONAL BLOGS USED FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Morris Telford: The Blog</i>¹⁴ (an amusing adventure diary, by the BBC) • <i>Barbie's Blog</i>¹⁵ (the life and times of Barbie, by Mattel) • <i>Manolo's Shoe Blog</i>¹⁶ (shoe recommendations by a fictional Manolo) | | | | |

Figure 2 Typology of Blog Fiction, Thomas, A. (2006) 'Fictional Blogs', in Axel Bruns *Uses of Blogs*³¹

Thomas' typology of Blog Fiction is broader than Mineau's, including fiction in

²⁹ Angela Thomas, 'Fictional Blogs', in *Uses of Blogs* ed. by Alex Bruns and Joanne Jacobs, Digital Formations (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.199-210.

³⁰ Thomas, p.199.

³¹ Thomas, p.200.

which the blog is used purely as a publishing tool, without any use of epistolary or serialisation, though she also defines blog fiction as a genre in which an author or authors have used a blog as a writing device, using all of the features afforded by the blogging or journaling software, such as hyperlinks, graphics, and the commenting system.³²

This use of blogs as a writing device (as opposed to merely a publishing device) is the first category distinction in Thomas' typology, which goes on to categorise according to both the use of blog features (diary format, containment of narrative) and social or cultural features (whether the blog is commercial, part of an interactive game, based on existing fictional or historical sources). According to this typology, *Bad Influences* would be using the blogs as a writing tool for a contained story,³³ with elements of interactive role-play on a set of character diaries with a fictional source (though it's worth pointing out that that source is original, not a fan fiction as suggested by the example on the typology). This is a much looser definition, one which takes into account formal aspects but is equally concerned with a blog fiction's relational qualities: the communities of readers and writers that form and interact around and through it. Indeed, the nature of blogs as a personal and social phenomenon, inviting comment and invoking community even while aggressively marking out and defending personal identity and territory, is an essential aspect of blog fiction's poetics. Aukje van Rooden has coined the term 'Relational Poetics',³⁴ after Baurriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*,³⁵ to describe an analysis in which a literary text is defined:

not as an entity functioning within a context, but as a phenomenon in which text and context emerge together, are co-existent and mutually constitute each-other. [...] A literary text, in other words, is not an entity located at the margins or at a distance from the wor[l]d [sic], as many

³² Thomas, p.201.

³³ Perhaps this could be disputed, since the story takes place over four separate blogs and there is further discussion on a meta-blog, Facebook page and Twitter account, which even give codes to access secret posts within the blogs. However, since the narrative itself is contained within the blogs and no other media, it seems reasonable to describe them as a contained blog fiction.

³⁴ Aukje van Rooden, 'Relational Poetics: Towards A Reevaluation of The Literary Within Cultural Studies' in *Current Issues in European Cultural Studies* held by Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS) at Norrköping (15 June 2011), pp.453-458
<<http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/062/046/ecp11062046.pdf>> [19-01-2013].

³⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2002).

literary theories have it, but is a form of entering into relation with the world, is itself a worldly relation.³⁶

This relational aspect of blog fiction's poetics is not only relevant to the modes of interaction that the form makes possible, but the very means by which it is created, distributed and accessed. The writing and reading of blog fiction is, as we will see in future chapters, intrinsically relational, this poetics manifesting in the de-emphasis of the text as a single artefact and a shift in focus towards the relationships that the text catalyses between writers, readers and the world.

Aside from Thomas' topology, the only academic work that attempts to define blog fiction as a form is the 2007 undergraduate senior thesis *Fictional Blogs: How Digital Narratives are Changing the Way We Read and Write* by Betsy Friedrich.³⁷ This is a significant text, since as well as exploring the formal properties of blog fiction in some depth for the level of study, it includes an extensive bibliography of the blog fiction in existence at the time (much of which is no longer accessible) and in-depth interviews with some of the most active blog fiction writers when use of the form was at its height. Friedrich gives the following definition of blog fiction:

First, the work is published on-line. [...] Works printed and bound, as *The Lost Blogs* and *God's Blog*, are books. Other characteristics of a fictional blog are epistolarity, serialization, linearity, interactivity, and the possibility for multimediacy.³⁸

This is a little more specific than the other definitions we have seen, covering Thomas' requirements for publication on a blog and Mineau's additional specifications for serialisation and interactivity, and further supplementing 'linearity' and 'the possibility for multimediacy' to the essential qualities of blog fiction. Given that all blogging platforms now are designed to easily embed images, video and audio, the *potential* for multimediacy can be assumed, though the extent to which it is used by writers may vary wildly. Linearity, however, is an interesting point, which will be covered briefly here and explored in more depth in Chapter 3. What is notable for now is that Doval's *Plan B*, the earliest example that could be

³⁶ van Rooden, p.456.

³⁷ Betsy Friedrich, *Fictional Blogs: How Digital Narratives are Changing the Way We Read and Write* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Coe College, 2007).

³⁸ Friedrich, p.6.

included in all the other definitions of blog fiction, arguably does not meet this criterion. Friedrich, in separating blog fiction from hypertext narrative, says:

Hypertext seeks to obliterate linearity in every possible way. In contrast, blogs present a rigidly linear narrative which is mandated by the host software. Blogging applications attach a date and time stamp to each post [...] This arrangement makes chronology an unavoidable aspect of blogging. Posts must be set in time in relation to the other posts.³⁹

It is true that the date-stamp is an essential element of the blogging platform, and that no matter how the author attempts to play with multiple reading orders, the default presentation on the blog's front page creates an inescapable implied linearity. Yet Doval says of *Plan B*:

Stories usually have a strong element of time built into them, just like a weblog. A weblog, however, is a story where the beginning changes every day: what we see is the last element that was posted. The question that *Plan B* is trying to answer is: is it possible to create a story that makes sense, keeps the reader engaged, and yet can be 'consumed' in bits and pieces, maybe even in any order? This is not the same as a hypertextual story [...] The idea here is that the time dimension exists [...] but each entry can also be read as an independent element. Ideally [...], you should also be able to navigate the text in different directions, which means that the story will be more 'experiential' than plot-oriented.⁴⁰

So while the linearity is indeed an inescapable aspect of the blog (as a medium), this does not necessarily mean that blog fiction (as a form using that medium) must be read in a linear way. Blog fictions containing multiple blogs, as *Bad Influences* does, may have an original posting order, but there are various options in terms of reading order. Should the reader go through all the posts that comprise the story in chronological order, or read each character's entire blog in turn? Whichever of these the reader chooses, they additionally have the option to read from the beginning or to come in at the latest episode, as per the standard blog

³⁹ Friedrich, p.10.

⁴⁰ Doval, <<http://www.dynamicobjects.com/d2r/planb/whatisplanb.html>>.

format, and read backwards. Doval's aim suggests that this, or even a random browsing of posts and following hyperlinks between them, would be a natural way to read blog fiction and should work because each post is able to stand alone. This is reflected in the fact that *Plan B*, while using a blogging platform for its medium, hides the timestamps (though each post does link to a 'next' and 'previous' post). In fact, timestamps are not as inflexible as Friedrich suggests, and many blog fictions falsify them deliberately in order to set the fiction in a specific year (*Bad Influences* was posted in real time but set in 2026, while *Peep This Diary* covers the years 1676-8) or even to imply a timeline other than the one in which the writer actually posted (*Days ago Diary* ignores the timestamp and simply lists the posts by the number of days that have elapsed since the narrator began posting his story).

The term 'blog fiction' is currently interpreted in a number of different ways. Some of the listings under 'blogfic' on the *Web Fiction Guide*⁴¹ are merely first person novels serialised on blogs, while what Mineau classified as a 'blog novel' (blog-aware, epistolary blog fiction, narrated by character(s) aware that they are blogging) is referred to by some regular reviewers on *WFG* as 'true blogfic'.⁴² How long these classifications will remain in any kind of use is doubtful. *WFG* is the last directory left that uses the term 'blogfic' as a specific category.

For my own purposes, I wish to explore blog fiction as a fictional form that uses a blog as its medium, which is epistolary, serialised and interactive: elements covered by all three definitions examined here. The only extra elements are Friedrich's linearity and multimediacy. As established, multimediacy (or its potential) can be taken as implicit. Linearity, as an aspect of the epistolary and serialised nature of blog fiction, is also implicit in my definition, as will become apparent when we explore the real-time nature of live blog fiction in Chapter 2. That said, it should be noted that linearity is a formal property and, as Friedrich

⁴¹ Drew Daniels et. al, *Web Fiction Guide* [internet forum;web site] <<http://webfictionguide.com/>> [accessed 13-08-2008]. This site consists of a directory, discussion forum and community for online fiction, in which readers can leave reviews and ratings. Henceforth *WFG*.

⁴² Fiona Gregory, 'Subtle, clever, thoughtful, and surprising', *WFG* [internet forum;web site], 27th Feb 2013 <<http://webfictionguide.com/blogfic/bad-influences/review-by-fiona/>> [accessed 13-08-2008].

acknowledges,⁴³ not an imperative for the reader to experience the text in any particular order, as will become clear in Chapter 3.

By specifying its epistolary nature, I am limiting my interest to ‘true blog fiction’, what Mineau calls ‘blog novels’. I will not be examining traditionally structured novels broken up into chapters to be serialised on blogs, though I do not insist that the narrator of a blog fiction knows or acknowledges that the medium is a blog. The narrative could take the form, as in *Starwalker*, of a transcript of a ship’s log, or as in ‘The Diary of Little Germaine’ (within *The Germaine Truth*), a paper-based diary transferred to a blog. Like Friedrich and Mineau, I reject non-serialised blog fiction, published initially in its entirety, though in Chapter 3 I will be investigating the exploratory properties that a blog fiction acquires once its serialisation is complete. The interactivity aspect covers many different relations, both within the text and beyond it. Commentary itself is not an essential feature of blog fiction (many real bloggers decline to use this feature), but it is necessary that contact between readers and writers, public or private, is possible while the narrative is still unfolding. These communications and their influence on both writers and readers are central to the relational nature of blog fiction’s poetics, and will be the subject of Chapter 4.

History of blog fiction

Blog fiction is not the first form to allow for epistolary experiments in real-time serialisation. Bevan and Wright’s *Online Caroline* (2001) presented a character through several media (including an online diary, emails and webcam segments). When readers (or perhaps players, as Walker suggests⁴⁴) signed up to her website, she would send them 24 daily updates telling her story. There are other early web fictions which could be considered proto-blog fiction, containing many (but not quite all) of the elements listed in the above definitions. *The Spot*⁴⁵ (1995) could almost be considered the first blog fiction. Described by Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* as a ‘web soap’,⁴⁶ *The Spot* consisted of several characters’ ‘online

⁴³ Friedrich, p.13

⁴⁴ Jill Walker Rettberg, ‘How I Was Played By Online Caroline’, *jill/txt* [web page], 23rd April 2004 <<http://jilltxt.net/txt/onlinecaroline.html>> [accessed 08-07-2014].

⁴⁵ Scott Zakarin, *The Spot* [web site], 1995 <<http://www.thespot.com>>, no longer online though a murder mystery sequel, seemingly abandoned in its early stages, now resides the address referenced.

⁴⁶ Murray Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p.213.

diaries', which were illustrated by photographs and videos, and discussed (by both the fictional characters and their readers) in an appended forum that fulfilled a similar function to that of the comments on a blog post. At *The Spot's* time of publication, blogging was not yet a phenomenon, but the soap nevertheless appears to have displayed all the definitive characteristics of blog fiction (being a real-time, serialised, interactive epistolary narrative) aside from the presence of a blogging platform. In the interests of drawing a clear line from which to begin this history, I will discount these interesting forerunners, and all else that does not fit my definition, though I include them here to show that an interest in online epistolary fiction existed before blogging presented an ideal medium.

Attempting to chart a chronology of blog fiction is complicated by the ephemeral nature of the form. Of the examples of blog fiction I have found during this study (over 100, dating from 2002 to the present day), almost half are no longer accessible: hidden or deleted by the author, or the webspace no longer maintained. The vast majority of the rest are inactive, a very small number remaining as completed projects. This presents difficulties in identifying the origins of blog fiction with any certainty, and my analysis of the form's development will be based on comparisons drawn from limited material, and from earlier analyses of material no longer available.

Diego Doval's *Plan B: A Blog Novel* (2002) was, as far as the author could ascertain, the first text of its kind.⁴⁷ In his FAQ and his explanation of *Plan B*, Doval gives detailed analyses of his intentions for the experiment, his ideas about the blog as a form for fiction and how this relates to similar forms, such as epistolary stories, serialised novels and hypertext. He does not claim any special originality in his experiment,⁴⁸ but neither does he cite anything similar enough to be put in the same category. Very similar texts were being dubbed 'blogfic' by 2004,⁴⁹ when blogging began to become a mainstream phenomenon and blog fiction entered its most prolific period.

⁴⁷ Doval, <<http://www.dynamicobjects.com/d2r/planb/planbfaq.html>>Doval, <<http://www.dynamicobjects.com/d2r/planb/whatisplanb.html>>.

⁴⁸ Doval, <<http://www.dynamicobjects.com/d2r/planb/planbfaq.html>>

⁴⁹ Jack [pseudonym], 'What's a blogfic', *Blogfic* [blog], October 19th 2004 <<http://www.blogfic.com/>> [accessed 18-08-2014]. (No longer available, accessed through Wayback Machine: <<http://web.archive.org/web/20041101153012/http://www.blogfic.com/>>)

Much early blog fiction took the form of character blogs, for the most part extended jokes based on the juxtaposition of a well-known fictional or historical character with the mundanity and modernity of blogging. *Bloggus Caesari*, *The Darth Side: Memoirs of a Monster* and *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog* are notable examples of this. Though events were sometimes related on these blogs with a coherent continuity, blog fictions of this type were rarely plot-driven, their appeal being based largely in the viewpoint of the blogging character and (in some cases) the chance for communities of readers to interrogate the fictional blogger on their opinions and motivations, perceived inconsistencies in their actions (historical or fictional) or to simply dive into the conceit of the blog, trying their hand at conversing in Middle English, or giving Darth Vader lifestyle and family advice.

Blog fiction with more developed narratives soon appeared in many styles and genres, though blogs of superheroes or characters with various special powers quickly gained prominence (such as *Superdaph*, *Glass House* and *Up and Onward: Confessions of a Super Hero*.) These were soon joined by blogs of the horror genre, with zombie and vampire themes predominating, some mocking the fashionable resurgence of these genres (*(Un)Dead Man Blogging* and *Trinity, Texas Vampire*), others taking both the form and genre seriously (*The Apocalypse Blog*, *The Day the Sun Rose Twice*.) Non-genre blog fiction tended to focus on the inner lives and psychology of narrators with particularly striking worldviews (*Anonymous Lawyer*, *KristenAC the ManiAC*, *I Woke Up In Pittsburg*), and some simply went for the surreal or absurd, with animal narrators (*Atyllah the Hen*, *Itsy Bitsy Fritsy*) sub-atomic particles (*-e: life as an electron*) or an 18-foot teenager just trying to lead a normal life (*Giant Girl Rampages*).

Blog Fictions that have deliberately set out to experiment with form have been rare. More often, formal characteristics (e.g. the first person voice, the use of comments, the frequency of the posts) emerge simply from the use of the blog as a medium, so that writers and readers discover as they go the styles and conventions that work best, influenced partly by associations with the genre, partly the blogger's tone and partly by the practice of blogging itself. For example, in response to a reader asking about the theory that Chaucer had been with the 'Pearl Poet' in Aquitaine, the writer of *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog* posted an

entry entitled 'Ich and the Perle Poete, on Mont Dorse-Quasse',⁵⁰ parodying the film *Brokeback Mountain*, which was a popular topic of discussion throughout the blogosphere at the time. The contemporary reference transposed to a Medieval setting, with the blog's trademark translations of well-known quotes and memes into Middle English, made this one of the funniest and most popular posts on the blog.

Some blog fictions have experimented with multiple characters, either on the same blog (*Peep This diary*, *The Urban 30*) or over several (*Slice*, *Station 151/Unknown Transmission*.) One of the most interesting experiments was *The Germaine Truth*, a truly ambitious and massively absorbing experiment in building an entire fictional town through multiple blogs, which was unfortunately never completed. Duane Poncy, the co-author of *The Germaine Truth*, told Friedrich:

Since our story is suppose[sic] to be in real time, the greatest challenge has been in keeping up the story in a timely manner. We haven't done very well at this.⁵¹

The reasons for this can be surmised by other comments in the interview, such as 'This was all originally intended to involve more people, interactively [...]'⁵² and 'We have it plotted out somewhat, including a couple of mysteries which we plan to develop. But much of it is just spontaneous.'⁵³ And most tellingly:

I think contemporary readers may demand something more dynamic than merely a static blog, but it takes a lot of energy. If we could figure out a way to earn enough money from our work to spend more time on keeping it up, I think it could eventually be successful. So far it's just a fun hobby.⁵⁴

A real-time, serialised, multi-character blog fiction is a lot of work for one or two writers to keep up as a hobby. Writing entries spontaneously, with enough regularity to maintain an audience, is not only time-consuming in the ways a writer

⁵⁰ Galfridus Chaucer [pseudonym], 'Ich and the Perle Poete, on Mont Dorse-Quasse', *Chaucer Hath a Blog* [blog fiction], 25th March 2006 <<http://houseoffame.blogspot.co.uk/2006/03/ich-and-perle-poete-on-mont-dorse.html>> [accessed 01-02-2008].

⁵¹ Friedrich, p.120

⁵² Friedrich, p.119

⁵³ Friedrich, p.119

⁵⁴ Friedrich, p.120.

would normally expect of a project, it is unpredictably so. The interactive nature of the medium demands near-instant responses, which may be incompatible with the demands of writing for a living (not to mention maintaining a life outside of writing). One method of overcoming this (which I employed for *Bad Influences*) is to have a story pre-written, so that minor editing, the occasional plot tweak and brief written responses to interactive commentary are all that need to be authored during the posting process. Yet experimental blog fictions tend to be, as Poncy points out, 'a hobby', and since the gratification of interaction and feedback are all the payoff a writer will get, it does not seem worth their while to delay this with a lengthy writing and editing process prior to posting. There is also perhaps a sense that intricate preparation of an interactive story is undesirable, as it reduces the potential for reader responses to change the direction of the narrative, as Mineau suggests in a comment on his blog:

I think it's alright if the whole thing is 99% pre-written. However, the character should still interact with readers, or the author be ready to edit some parts, based on comments, to be considered blog fiction. Otherwise, what would set the blog fiction apart from any other literature written in a diary format?⁵⁵

This was in response to my enquiry as to whether his definition could accommodate a blog fiction that was entirely pre-written by a single author but posted episodically, in real-time. At the time, this had been my plan for *Bad Influences*, and though Mineau agreed that it would be difficult not to count such a work as within his definition, I reconsidered and opted to include interactive reader commentary (albeit with a strict agreement that participants place themselves into the storyworld and do not break character). Had I simply written all fictional commentary on the blogs myself, *Bad Influences* may still have appeared to all intents and purposes to be an interactive blog fiction, but in the lack of potential for reader participation it would have lost an element that, as we shall see in future chapters, was vital to the reading and writing processes, a key aspect of blog fiction's relational poetics.

This necessity to leave elements of a blog fiction unprepared or open to change may be one explanation as to why the more experimental forms of blog fiction

⁵⁵ Mineau, <<http://www.snowcow.com/writing/blog-fiction-defined>>.

have not been successful. Experimental forms are notoriously unappealing to publishers, and ones that will lose much of their appeal on the printed page even more so. While some blog fictions have gone on to be published in print (e.g. *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog*⁵⁶ and *Anonymous Lawyer*⁵⁷), for most writers the practice is not nearly such a sound investment of time and energy as a traditional novel. Therefore, unless a writer has the resources and lifestyle to make a blog fiction their major focus for a significant amount of time, it is unlikely they will be able to follow the experiment through to its full potential.

It did not always seem that this would be the case. There was briefly an idea that writing a blog, fictional or ambiguously true, was a useful means to publicising a potential novel, and for a short while blog fiction gained a little media interest.⁵⁸ However, for the aforementioned reasons, there was little in the way of high quality literary blog fiction to be found, and some of the most high profile examples to catch the public imagination did so largely through speculation over whether or not they were fictional (e.g. *She's a Flight Risk*, *Diary of a London Call Girl*.) As blogs became more commonplace, blog fiction was taken up by the media less as a literary form than a marketing tool, so that TV tie-in blogs (*How I Met Your Mother*, *Grey's Anatomy*) and commercial mascot blogs (*Hello, I'm Nuvi*, *Captain Morgan*, *Baby Oleg Diary*) are the only examples that most readers are likely to come across.

While commercial interests now tend to concentrate on Facebook or Twitter, there are still some uses of blog fiction as transmedial expansions of TV series (*Sherlock* notably has *The Personal Blog of Dr. John H. Watson* and *Sherlock's Science of Deduction* website). Most original blog fiction, however, remains largely the preserve of unpublished writers, sometimes practising their craft in the hopes of future publication, but often simply seeking a responsive readership online. Current blog fiction writers still favour the superhero genre (*World Domination in Retrospect*, *Zephyr*), while space opera (*Starwalker*, *Das Orbit*), fantasy adventure

⁵⁶ Brantley L. Bryant, *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog: Medieval Studies and New Media*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁵⁷ Jeremy Blachman, *Anonymous Lawyer* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).

⁵⁸ See Jim McClellan, 'How to write a blog-buster', *The Guardian* (8 April 2004), <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2004/apr/08/weblogs.onlinesupplement>> [18-07-2008] and Sonia Faleiro, 'There is Someone Out There', *The Indian Express* (16 May 2004), <http://www.indianexpress.com/india-news/full_story.php?content_id=46845> [06-08-2007].

(*Dragomir's Diary*), zombie and horror themes (*Days Ago Diary*, *The Sick Land*) are well represented in the blogfic category at *WFG*.

The problem for current blog fiction writers and readers is how to find one another. A combination of the proliferation of blogs themselves (there are now over 75 million Wordpress sites,⁵⁹ as compared to around 1 million in 2007⁶⁰) and the diminishing use of 'blog fiction' and 'blogfic' as terms, create poor conditions for a fruitful Google search. In 2007, before Twitter, and before Facebook had pages and interest groups that could be used for publicising personal projects, Poncy told Friedrich:

According to our web stats we have about 1000 unique visitors each month to thegermainetruth.net. We make sure we are listed on the search engines, and we advertise on our email signatures. Other than that, we have done little advertising.⁶¹

Bad Influences had 868 non-unique hits a month at its peak (February 2013, the second month of posting) and diminished from there, with less than 200 in its final month of November 2013. Popular web fictions tend to take time to build a strong following, but there's no question that this is harder than it used to be. There are mentions of blog fiction in the broader analysis of digital fiction and other related forms, such as hypertext, but aside from some categorised reviews on *WFG*, nobody in the online fiction community, the press or academia appears to be currently discussing and writing specifically about blog fiction on a regular basis, and this will lead to a reduction in the number of people discovering the concept, searching for it by name and finding it. Googling the term and searching academic databases will find little that's both current and relevant on the first few pages of search results. Many of the communities, blogs and fora that discussed and promoted blog fiction at its height are no longer online at all: *Blogfic.com*, the *Terran Resistance* forum, the *Fictional Bloggers* Yahoo group, *Pages Unbound*

⁵⁹ 'A live look at activity across WordPress.com', *Wordpress.com* [web site] <<https://wordpress.com/activity/>> [accessed 14-02-2014].

⁶⁰ 'Stats', *Wordpress.com* [web site]

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20090206161019http://en.wordpress.com/stats/>> (as published by wordpress on their stats page in 2009, viewed through *Wayback Machine*, <<http://archive.org/web/>>).

⁶¹ Friedrich, p.120

and the *Fiction Bloggers* webring have all been abandoned or discontinued. While the reading and writing of online serialised fiction by new and established writers alike is growing with the advent of platforms such as *Wattpad*,⁶² the very fact that these platforms are emerging for this purpose reduces the likelihood of online writers experimenting with blog fiction, or readers seeking it. Those who are looking simply for free fiction to read online have little reason to look beyond traditional formats, while those who read blog fiction due to an interest in experimental and emergent literary forms will move towards more innovative projects on newer social media, such as twitter fiction (examples of which can be seen on the Twitter Fiction Festival website⁶³) and the more ludic, visually compelling digital literature that comprises much of the *Electronic Literature Organisation's* collections.⁶⁴

As micro-blogging and the fully-fledged Social Network gained prominence, blog fiction lost its chance to become the 'hot new literary trend'⁶⁵ it was once hailed as. Few blog fictions experimented with consistently faithful real-time serialisation, and rarely did so with any sustained, structured narrative making deliberate use of the feature. There was experimentation with stories narrated through multiple blogs, but rarely with interaction between them. Many used the comment threads for reader feedback, and some writers even replied to this feedback in-character, but few used the comments narratively, with a concerted effort to maintain the integrity of the storyworld. For most that used any design beyond a standard template, this served the function of a book cover rather than a reflection of the character's artistic talents (see *Starwalker*, *Dragomir's Diary*, *Simon of Space*).

Bad Influences was intended to explore some of the untapped potential of the blog fiction form. I used blog design for character exposition and development, with the blogs appearing to be created by the characters themselves, saving my own profile and the story's 'cover design' for the project site. Comment threads at the end of posts, memes and quizzes that the characters and readers can complete and share, were used for character interaction and reader participation, keeping

⁶² *Wattpad* gained a significant following when Margaret Atwood and Naomi Alderman decided to make it the platform for their collaboration, *The Happy Zombie Sunrise Home*.

⁶³ *#TwitterFiction Festival* [web site] <<http://twitterfictionfestival.com/>> [accessed 22-01-2015].

⁶⁴ 'Electronic Literature Collection', *Electronic Literature Organisation* [web site] <<http://collection.eliterature.org/>> [accessed 09-03-2016].

⁶⁵ Faleiro, 'There is Someone Out There'.

out-of-character commentary on other social media, at a distance from the blogs themselves. Multiple blogs were used for a single, multi-linear story, serialised in real-time but with potential for a number of different reading orders upon completion. *Bad Influences* was by no means the first blog fiction to use any of these features but, as far as I have been able to discover, it is the first to use all of them together, consistently, for the duration of a completed narrative.

Summary

My aim in writing *Bad Influences* was to experiment with these underused narrative devices, unique to blog fiction, and so to investigate the poetics of the form.

This was, therefore, a practice-led research project. Its purpose was partly to analyse and make observations on the impact formal features of blog fiction had on the acts of writing, serialising, reading and interacting with the narrative. However, it is important to remember that the practice was not simply a means to this analysis but was, itself, the larger part of the research. My discoveries on the structures and poetics of blog fiction are explained in the analytical part of this thesis, but the answer to the question of how the formal features of the blog can be used narratively in blog fiction is answered in the form of *Bad Influences* itself.

While I discovered many elements of interest from a traditional creative writing, poetics and narratological perspective (such as a distinct form of first person narration, problems of reported action, pacing issues - all discussed in forthcoming chapters), I also found something more interesting: that the composition of *Bad Influences* was affected far more drastically than I had anticipated by interaction, and not just the obvious forms of interaction (i.e. readers' ability to comment on blogs) but the subtler forms that had not occurred to me until I found myself embroiled in them: what it means to follow a real-time narrative as it unfolds live, the navigability of multiple blogs forming one story, how discussions of the ongoing narrative outside the blogs themselves (on social media and online fiction fora) affect the development of the narrative. It soon seemed that the greater part of the story was not simply what my characters were doing or even how they were writing about it, but how readers related to their stories and entangled them with

their own, and how - through that process - they related to me and to one another.

Suddenly it was not merely the text or the process of writing it that was important, it was the distributions of the text and the processes of discovering, untangling and interacting with it, of relating to it and through it, that gave the story its significance. I reached the conclusion that the poetics of blog fiction were intrinsically relational. The following three chapters explore the particular ways in which this relational poetics manifested through the narrative's distributions in time, space and authorship. The final chapter investigates some similar forms of socially networked fiction that may develop this relational poetics in new directions.

Chapter 2

Distribution in time: Live blog fiction and real-time storytelling

While blog fiction is in the process of serialisation, it is particularly reliant on distribution in time.¹ As a medium that can be accessed at any time by both writer and reader, the blog offers great flexibility in the potential for epistolary and serialisation to combine as real-time narrative. Yet, as we have seen, few blog fictions have used real-time consistently over the course of a sustained, structured narrative. I wanted *Bad Influences* to be an explicitly and consistently real-time narrative, and for this real-time element to give the story a sense of reality for the reader. I aimed to build upon the sense of real-time implicit in the date-stamps of the entries with an awareness of the ways in which holidays, seasons and daily routines would affect the characters differently in their differing time-zones, and use distribution in time to create a sense that the characters – along with the reader – continued to live their lives even when they were not blogging.

Though all serialised narratives exhibit a form of distribution in time, the internet has allowed writers to directly distribute narrative at irregular, unpredictable intervals: a device that is not practicable when managing broadcast schedules or periodical publications. The way that readers incorporate the unpredictable access to the narrative into their daily lives can have a profound effect on its consumption. In *The New Digital Storytelling*, Bryan Alexander lists a number of blogs that, rather than presenting original fictional material, re-publish pre-existing diaries, newspapers and epistolary novels in real-time by transposing them to blogs (Alexander himself applies this process to *Dracula*.²) He notes that, 'the format defamiliarizes the document [...]. The blog reading revises the blogger's sense of the time.'³ In other words, while the story itself is unchanged, the blogger's and readers' *relation* to the story is transformed by its distribution in time.

¹ Jill Walker, 'Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks' in *IR 5.0* held by Association of Internet Researchers at Brighton (21 September 2004), pp.12 <<http://jilltxt.net/txt/AoIR-distributednarrative.pdf>> [04-07-2012].

² Bryan Alexander, *The New Digital Storytelling: Creating Narratives with New Media* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011), p.55.

³ Alexander, p.55-56.

Heise points out in *Chronoschisms* that ‘Innovations in [...] the fusion of computers and telecommunications have foregrounded mainly two temporal values: simultaneity and instantaneity.’⁴ These two concepts succinctly characterise our relation to real-time serialised texts. Simultaneity describes the correlation between the rate at which time passes within the story and outside of it. Instantaneity establishes a strong sense of the story being always in the present. The further effects of this are variable, but to a large extent this sense of immediacy, along with a correlation between real and fictional worlds, between readers and characters, allows for a particular sense of immersion: not the traditional notion of the reader ‘losing themselves’ in a story that eclipses their reality for the duration of their attention to it, but instead a sense of finding themselves inside the narrative’s implied duration, which is overlaid onto their real life. Both the narrative and the reader’s material existence put them in the position of reading a blog that updates when a character chooses to post.

This shared temporal reality with the story is essential to the interaction between readers and writers of live blog fiction. Real-time serialisation makes possible a two-way conversation that is far more dynamic, and has more potential to influence the text, than those of more conventionally serialised forms, such as the letters pages of monthly comics. Even when direct communication does not take place between writers and readers, the real-time factors of simultaneity and instantaneity have a profound influence on a reader’s experience of the text. To understand why this is, it is useful to examine the ways that narrative time is established and analysed in more conventional prose narratives, and the ways in which blog fiction differs from these.

The Basics of Narrative Time

Leaving aside the philosophical problem of what time truly is and how people experience it, narratologists and philosophers are generally agreed that the time-sense we experience in prose narratives, whether on the level of the diegesis (the story being narrated) or the text (the product or process in which the story is presented) is not truly temporal, but a representation of a complex, multi-faceted experience, in the limited and necessarily linear form of language.

⁴ Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism*, Literature, Culture, Theory (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.23.

Neither the time of the telling (called *Erzählzeit* by Genette,⁵ discourse-time by Chatman,⁶ text-time by Rimmon-Kenan)⁷ nor the time implied to pass within the events told (*Erzählte Zeit*⁸ or story-time)⁹ reproduces the multilinear, often simultaneous nature of events as we must understand them in all but the simplest of stories. Story-time may cover a year in a paragraph, or stretch a few seconds out to several pages, while discourse or text-time varies with an individual's reading speed, both remaining 'pseudotemporal' rather than truly representative of time.¹⁰

This is as true within any given post of a blog fiction as it is of any prose narrative: the narration of events follows the same conventions as any other prose narration. However, on the level of the overall text during serialisation, something different occurs. In most written fiction, even serialised written fiction, the time taken to present or tell the story events cannot be synchronous with the time implied to pass within the narrative itself. In blog fiction, though, while the time taken to read each post may vary, the time taken for the posts to become available for reading can correlate with story-time. Though the reader is unlikely to consume each post as it appears, real-time posting creates an implied discourse-time, an ideal reading schedule based on the time that it became *possible* to access each post or comment. As each additional post is a diegetic event taking place within story-time, this brings story-time and discourse-time into alignment. While the story-time and discourse-time *within* each blog post remain pseudotemporal, the *overall* story-time (that of the time passing for the characters from one posted blog entry to the next, and from the first posted entry to the most recent) is aligned with the reader's own sense of passing time, allowing the writer to use time itself as a narrative device.

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.33.

⁶ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 62).

⁷ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, New Accents (London: Routledge, 1983), p.46.

⁸ Genette, p.33.

⁹ Chatman, p.62; Rimmon-Kenan, p.46.

¹⁰ Rimmon-Kenan, p.46.

In this way, real-time brings discourse-time into correlation with story-time. This is not the spatial, pseudo-temporality described by Rimmon-Kenan. It overcomes her stated lack of an objective standard for measuring text-duration¹¹ by using the reader's own awareness of time as its standard. While Rimmon-Kenan points out that prose dialogue nears this standard through '[...] a rendering of language in language [...]',¹² blog fiction goes further, creating true temporal equivalence by rendering time as time – not within the posts, but in the spaces between them.

Pacing in blog fiction

This rendering of time as time can be seen in the effect of posting frequency on pacing in blog fiction. In draft form, I had edited the early entries of *Bad Influences* in an attempt to accelerate pace. While each entry, in itself, may have been improved by this process, the beginning of the story still proceeded slowly, as evidenced by both reader feedback¹³ and my own observations. Though the entries were short and succinct, they were infrequent, and it took too long for the characters to connect with their plot. The action that the less favourable reviews found lacking was imminent, and had been brought forward by my edits in traditional text-time, but not in real-time. As Friedrich points out:

[...] The frequency of posts sets a pace to the story, and the cliffhanger intentionally left over the weekend, or posting several times in one day are as much a part of the telling of the story as the text.¹⁴

The example of cliffhangers is especially interesting. Though common in most serialised media, blog fiction cliffhangers work differently, not freezing the frame to continue from the moment of impending peril when the reader 'tunes in next week', but presenting an impending dilemma (such as Mei's suggestion that she will risk infection to give her dying neighbour company).¹⁵ The reader cannot predict the appearance of the update, and need not wait passively for it. They may comment with advice and opinion, checking regularly for a response. The suspense – unlike

¹¹ Rimmon-Kenan, p.51.

¹² Rimmon-Kenan, p.52.

¹³ Wildbow [pseudonym], 'This epidemic starts off slow', *Web Fiction Guide* [web page], Feb 10 2013 <<http://webfictionguide.com/blogfic/bad-influences/review-by-wildbow/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

¹⁴ Betsy Friedrich, *Fictional Blogs: How Digital Narratives are Changing the Way We Read and Write* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Coe College, 2007), p.40.

¹⁵ Emma Segar, 'We are too late', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 10 March 2013 <<http://brighterhorizon.wordpress.com/2013/03/10/we-are-too-late/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

that in a weekly drama serial – lies less in predictions of what will happen next than speculations on what is happening *now*.

When posting *Bad Influences*, my awareness of the characters' sense of passing time allowed me to alter the pacing as the serialisation continued. My plan for the ending of the story had had Elaine wandering the streets of Canberra for several weeks with few updates, while the other characters' stories prepared to conclude so that they could all move on in quite rapid succession. In a novel, Elaine's waiting time would have been a discreet omission, her narration continuing at the point of relevant action. However, in real-time the weeks stretched out tangibly, creating a void that needed to be filled. I began to wonder what was left for Elaine in Canberra, what prevented her from moving on, and this led me to the addition of a post in which she goes home.¹⁶ The space this gave her for reflection kept the pace of her story steady with the others, and gave her closure a proximity to recent revelations that lent it credence.

Planning blog fiction

The real-time element of blog fiction brings to the writing process an awareness of when a character's frame of mind has to drive the plot in a certain direction, not in the current chapter or paragraph, or at a critical juncture of the plot, but *now*, in the character's moment of decision. This means that plans and preparations for blog fiction are subject to constant change, which may explain why many writers do not attempt to prescribe too much in advance. Friedrich interviewed several of the most prolific blog fiction writers at the time of her study and came to the conclusion that:

Most fictional blogs [...] are not pre-planned. In some cases [...] it simply does not occur to the author to plan ahead, but there are some authors who prefer improvisation. Omalanz-Hood wrote, 'I do not plan ahead...I do not know where it is going, it is up to reader interaction,' and blogger Tadhg Kelly, author of *American Hate*, wrote, 'There is an element of discovery for me in it as much as for my readers which I quite enjoy.'¹⁷

¹⁶ Emma Segar, 'Going Home', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 15 October 2013 <<http://lonerlain.wordpress.com/2013/10/15/going-home/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

¹⁷ Friedrich, pp. 43-44.

Though live blog fiction is often partly or wholly improvised, my aim was to bring four blogs together with a planned, coherent plot. I initially plotted all four characters' stories separately, only identifying points of convergence where their influence on one another could be pivotal. This gave me several fixed points in the narrative that I knew would have to coincide in real-time, and I scheduled the rest of the stories around these. The most practical tool I found for this was a digital calendar, which allowed me to use the year 2026, create an appointment for each post, colour-code and categorise by character, set the time zone and time of posting and place the notes and draft of the post in the event description. This arrangement meant that I could view the schedule by day, week or month, and reschedule by simply dragging the appointments around the calendar. Without this tool, it would have been logistically overwhelming to try to plot out the entire multi-character story in advance, and it is easy to see why many writers would rather work spontaneously.

Nevertheless, there are dangers in spontaneity. Many blog fictions lose momentum or become contradictory because their writers either fall behind schedule or forget details from early entries. The planning process helped me to identify inconsistencies and make a great many improvements to character, plot and language that would not have been possible if I were composing as well as posting in real-time. I was largely posting revised and polished work that had already benefitted from private feedback, rather than raw drafts, which present dangers of their own. Friedrich noted that:

The performance art aspect of fictional blogs makes over-arching, higher order revision of the story itself nearly impossible. Although blogging technology allows published work to be called back, edited, and re-published, if one has an audience, revision of the storyline or dialogue becomes stickier.¹⁸

After feedback on the beginning of *Bad Influences* confirmed that my over-editing had failed to speed the pace, some reviewers felt that the appropriate course of action would be to go back and correct this, to revise the early posts or post extra

¹⁸ Friedrich, pp.41-42.

ones, retroactively improving the beginning of the story.¹⁹ While I agreed that this may benefit new readers, it would make little difference to existing ones, who would be unlikely to re-read from the beginning. Because the relation of the story's time-frame to the reader's is so central to the poetics of blog fiction, it is more important to retain the real-time performance than to make retroactive improvements. Simultaneity and instantaneity must be maintained, at least while the story is still live.

Time as a Narrative Tool

The practice of using time as a medium in this way is a new one, subtly different from simply writing in the time-based media of stage, screen and radio, and presenting challenges that are not, at first, obvious. Writers need to pay close attention to the plausibility of their story-time, not just in its internal consistency but its consistent correlation with real-time. Though most of the blog posts and comment threads for *Bad Influences* were written before I began posting, I kept track of which posts each character was reading or writing at any given time, bearing in mind their respective time zones and commitments, and allowed time for them to complete their compositions before posting. For particularly time-specific events, such as Elaine's escape from the store²⁰ and Sue and Sarah's messages to Ash,²¹ I needed to allow in my schedule not only sufficient time for them to get to where they were writing from but to write up the posts before publishing them. In the process of posting, I would re-read each entry and make final edits and additions with an awareness of time and context that had not always been obvious when I composed the initial draft. My own awareness of the passing of real-time between entries became an important factor in the veracity of characterisation. My editing was influenced by a sense of how the characters would be feeling when they posted, how the proximity of previous events affected them, and how their awareness of the other characters' situations caused them to reconsider their own. For instance, I delayed Mei's account of her return to quarantine after a strong sense, on the day it was scheduled, that it was too soon,

¹⁹ Emma Segar, 'Reflections on time', *Under the Influence* [blog article], 11 February 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk/2013/02/11/reflections-on-time/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²⁰ Emma Segar, 'Lost the Store', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 12 September 2013 <<http://lonerlain.wordpress.com/2013/09/12/lost-the-store/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²¹ Emma Segar, 'امشب از ترک از حال در مایه‌ی آندم جانی', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 3 September 2013 <<http://nursinggrievances.wordpress.com/2013/09/03/امشب-از-ترک-از-حال-در-مایه-ی-آندم-جانی/>> [accessed 11-05-2015] and Emma Segar, 'A message for Ash', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 4 September 2013 <<http://nursinggrievances.wordpress.com/2013/09/04/a-message-for-ash/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

that she was too exhausted and disheartened to explain to her readers how the occupation was falling apart. I frequently found myself thinking about how the characters currently felt, both when they were posting and between posts. I considered how comments and questions would influence their state of mind and their inclination to respond. Elaine and Jack were gratified by the attention and relished the opportunity to describe and berate the world as they saw it, while Mei and Ash were often motivated to post by a sense of duty, a feeling that people were watching their blogs expectantly.

Comments on the Facebook page²², Twitter²³ and *Under the Influence*²⁴ blog had a similar effect on my efforts to edit and reschedule the story to come. When Shirly Shirl commented on sad endings,²⁵ I was alerted to the perception of Mei's second quarantine as a conclusion, and considered whether to forestall that expectation by bringing later events forward. I also felt I should reward readers who engaged at this level with hints and insights, which revealed character facets to me that, in turn, influenced my editing of future entries. The nature of these interactions and their significance for collaborative storytelling will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 4, but it is important to note that these are questions that wouldn't arise in a traditional novel, and if they arose in a serialised online novel with no epistolary element, the option to move events forward or back in real-time – for instance, to delay a scheduled post at the realisation that the character couldn't or shouldn't have written it yet – would not exist.

Writing in the Now

Blogs take place in the moment. They may talk about the past and speculate on the future, but they are grounded in the blogger's current and immediate state of mind. Consequently, blog fiction writers cannot restrict their awareness of their characters' states of mind to their most active contributions to the plot, they must be aware of them every day of the story, even when they will not post anything. They need a reason to *not have posted*, as well as a reason to post. The

²² Emma Segar, *Bad Influences* [facebook page] <<http://www.facebook.com/BadInfluencesBlogfic>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²³ Emma Segar, *BI_Blogfic* [twitter] <http://twitter.com/BI_Blogfic> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²⁴ Emma Segar, *Under the Influence* [blog] <<http://badinfluences.org.uk/under-the-influence/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²⁵ Emma Segar, 'Mei is back in quarantine', *Bad Influences* [facebook page], 1 August 2013 <<http://www.facebook.com/BadInfluencesBlogfic/posts/692070507474274>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

text-time of blog fiction continues to expand every moment that the story is live, whether or not the characters are posting or the reader is reading. The nature of the text-time implies that the characters exist between posts, in the ever-moving 'now', regardless of whether the reader is currently observing them.

This 'now' is different from the now that might be perceived by the reader of a novel. Any moment of time portrayed within a traditional narrative is experienced relative to the other moments in the diegesis, not to the reader's present. In the story contained within a novel or film, the past, present and future are all effectively past, even if they are narrated in present tense. The entirety of a novel is implied to have already 'happened' before the reader picks it up. As Mark Currie notes in *About Time*:

In written text, the future lies there to the right, awaiting its actualisation by the reading, so that written text can be said to offer a block view of time which is never offered to us in lived experience.²⁶

Although the reader experiences story-time sequentially, not as a simultaneous 'block', it is true that past and future can be accessed by the reader with the flick of a page (or a remote control, for film). Even if a passage is set on a specific date in a specific year, whether that date is in the reader's past or future, the only sense of 'now' that the reader can identify is the moment of story-time that they are currently engaged in reading. The nearest chronological moment in the story to the date and time in which the reader exists is no more relevant to their material experience than any other, no less complete and unchangeable.

In real-time narrative, this is different. While at any given moment of reading, the moment being narrated is implied to be past, it is not quite such an internal, relative past as that of a novel, because it is not only an externally defined past (identified by a date-stamp) but one that has happened in relation to an existing present that is shared by the actors and the reader, and to a potential future that is yet to be experienced by either. This creates the aforementioned sense of 'instantaneity', of the story happening in the current moment. Strangely, this is a sense that persists as a formal property even if that current moment is clearly

²⁶ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, The Frontiers of Theory (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.18

indicated as being in the past (as in *Peep This Diary*) or the future (as in *Bad Influences*). This is because the sense of narrative time is determined not by the proximity of the date-stamp to the reader's own temporal position on the calendar, but by the sense that story-time is passing at the same rate as the reader's own sense of time, that the characters 'exist' in the current moment. Every time the latest entry of a blog fiction is posted and becomes available to readers, although it is the events of the character's recent past that are portrayed, the posting of the entry itself has brought the ongoing life of the character into the reader's present moment, and demonstrated that their existence since the last entry has been active and not one of stasis, as in a paused video or a bookmark placed in a novel.

The sense of instantaneity is also derived from the mechanisms that notify readers of posts as and when they appear – such as RSS feeds, e-mail subscriptions, shares and retweets. The immediacy of these notifications, and their integration into readers' daily lives and routines through mobile technology, accelerates this nowness. It is accelerated still further when the events that characters blog are implied to have taken place immediately prior to blogging, even to be still in progress (as when Elaine spots raiders on her security cameras while blogging,²⁷ or Mei narrates the coughing and laboured breathing she can hear from her neighbour's room as she types.²⁸) The events of these entries continue into the comments, with a dialogue that is practically instantaneous. However, this level of immediacy (unlike that described above) relies on the coincidence of a reader following the commentary not merely while the blog fiction is live but as the scene itself takes place. The above examples did not have a live audience, and in an attempt to encourage one for a future live conversation, I had Jack post a comment in the most recent previous entry, encouraging the other characters to 'Get over to Ash's blog now'²⁹ to witness Sarah's 'blogjack'.³⁰ I had hoped that this direct response to a thread in which Fiona, a very active participant, was already

²⁷ Emma Segar, 'Looters', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 8 May 2013

<<http://lonerlain.wordpress.com/2013/05/08/looters/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²⁸ Emma Segar, 'We are too late', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 10 March 2013

<<http://brighterhorizon.wordpress.com/2013/03/10/we-are-too-late/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²⁹ Emma Segar, 'No more triggers or tomatoes', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 14 July 2013

<<http://lonerlain.wordpress.com/2013/07/14/no-more-triggers-or-tomatoes/comment-page-1/#comment-226>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

³⁰ Emma Segar, 'u blogjacked', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 19 July 2013

<<http://nursinggrievances.wordpress.com/2013/07/19/u-blogjacked/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

interacting may prompt a notification, and I even scheduled the exchange feasibly for her time zone. Though the notification and the live conversation were missed, Fiona later commented ‘Oh my I missed all this’³¹ before adding her thoughts on the discussion. The very fact that she perceived this as a live event that she missed, but was able to state to the characters her regret that she missed it, is indicative of the sense of reality and constancy the text-time had for her. She even included in her comment that she was: ‘Going for eggs now’, a subtle indication that she would not be around to continue the conversation even if there were an immediate response. In emerging real-time forms such as Twitter Fiction, this sense of instantaneity is heightened by the increasing likelihood of being able to read and respond to updates that were posted seconds ago, about events taking place only seconds prior to the tweet, in a process that (unlike writing or reading a long-form blog post) takes only seconds to complete. In ‘140 Characters in Search of a Story’, Bronwen Thomas notes this as a continuation of a tendency ‘whereby there is a near overlap of action and narration, representing a shift toward an aspiration to “Tell as you live” rather than “live now, tell later.”’³²

Friedrich and Walker Rettberg have both noted that the structure of the blog as a medium accentuates the present, or at least the recent, with the latest post being the first thing a reader sees, older posts being pushed progressively further away from the top of the website, so that the chronologically earliest posts are the furthest from the point at which we arrive in the text.³³ This is often pointed to as a contrast to the novel in which beginning, middle and end retain static positions in the text, with the chronologically last events usually at the end, the earliest usually nearest the beginning. However, this is not so stark a difference as it may appear. Heise, quoting Nowotny, speaks of an ‘extended present’ in the postmodern novel that replaces a future which ‘cannot function any longer as the screen for the projection of wish fulfilments; neither can it be used as the space to which

³¹ Emma Segar, 'u blogjacked', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 19 July 2013 <<http://nursinggrievances.wordpress.com/2013/07/19/u-blogjacked/#comments>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

³² Bronwen Thomas, '140 Characters in Search of a Story: Twitterfiction as an Emerging Narrative Form', in *Analyzing Digital Fiction* ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad, Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Stylistics (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp.94-108, p. 97.

³³ Friedrich, p.11. Jill Walker Rettberg, *Bloggging*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p.65.

existential fears are relegated.³⁴ Postmodern novels, such as *Slaughterhouse 5*³⁵ or *The Time-Traveller's Wife*,³⁶ create a strong sense of the present throughout by deliberately obscuring and confusing chronology, so that contemporary readers – while perhaps unused to real-time serialisation – are well-equipped for the concept of a structure that foregrounds the present moment, puts the past in our future path and leaves the future unknowable. We are able – and expect – to deal with temporal puzzles in which we are required to fit events into their meaningful narrative sequence ourselves, and we understand well that the first paragraph presented to us is not necessarily the chronological beginning of the story. As we will see in Chapter 3, this becomes still more relevant when a blog fiction completes its serialisation and is available to read in full. When it is still in the process of its real-time serialisation, however, blog fiction is much more rigidly linear in its text-time than most prose fiction. Though the ordering of posts on the spatial dimension of the blog makes its linearity appear reversed, the temporal dimension cannot help but present posts in perfect chronology. This said, there is nothing to prevent events within those posts from being narrated out of sequence, or the narrator from withholding information that will be revealed in a later post. In this respect, blog fiction has at its disposal the same devices for manipulating the construction of narrative time as other prose fiction, though when these are placed in the context of its real-time serialisation they can work in unexpected ways.

Anachrony in Real-Time Narrative

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette details three forms of anachrony: analepsis (narration of events that took place prior to the main diegesis), prolepsis (narrating those yet to take place, but then returning to the diegesis) and ellipsis (the diegesis takes a leap into the future, skipping over intervening events).³⁷ The narrators of a blog fiction can use these techniques in their own narration of their lives, but the real-time framework contextualises the story-time of their narration. For instance, when Jack confesses that he has been misleading the other bloggers in *Bad Influences*,³⁸ he engages in analeptic narration within the context of his own post. However, the reader's sense of the passage of time between the

³⁴ Heise, p.29.

³⁵ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse 5* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970)

³⁶ Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveller's Wife* (London: Vintage, 2005)

³⁷ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.40.

³⁸ Emma Segar, 'Coming Clean', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 30 October 2013 <<http://darthfarmboy.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/coming-clean/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

events the confession relates to and the revelation itself gives it an extra dimension. Rather than simply remembering the events that he refers to and realising that their narration was false, the reader can recall when they first read those entries, relate them to the other characters' stories at that time and have a true sense of the passage of time between what Jack is relating and the present moment. Unlike the unreliable narrator in a novel, Jack hasn't just *lied* to us, he *has been lying* to us *all this time*. To readers participating in the comments, he may even have lied all this time *to them personally*.

Another analepsis occurred in *Bad Influences* when Mei returned to her blog after a long absence and related what had happened to her.³⁹ If we were reading Mei's blog alone, chronologically, then this absence would be an ellipsis, a form of anachrony that normally accelerates pace by letting a period of story-time elapse without taking up any textual space, so that those events have no duration in text-time.⁴⁰ However, in blog fiction, ellipsis does have duration, both in the diegesis and the reader's corresponding experience of passing time. It is the duration of Mei's absence, the time that characters and readers have to wonder where she is and whether she is alive, that gives her reappearance a significance it could not acquire simply from the gap between the date-stamps from one post to the next. In a real-time text, because text-time has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension, an ellipsis extending beyond the confines of a single blog post does not serve to accelerate pacing. Neither does the opposite, '[...] a descriptive pause, where some segment of the text corresponds to zero story duration',⁴¹ work to decelerate it – except, again, within the confines of the single post in which it appears. Overall pace, as we have seen, is determined by the frequency of posts rather than their textual length in comparison to the events narrated.

Prolepsis at first seems impossible within blog fiction, since it requires omniscient narration. As we have established, one of the major temporal features of live blog fiction is that the future of the diegesis is not yet accessible to the reader or the characters. However, prolepsis can be more complex than a simple flash-forward.

³⁹ Emma Segar, 'Saying Goodbye', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 31 October 2013 <<http://brighterhorizon.wordpress.com/2013/10/31/saying-goodbye/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

⁴⁰ Rimmon-Kenan, p.53.

⁴¹ Rimmon-Kenan, p.53.

Currie speaks of three types of prolepsis, the first kind being that defined by Genette and used by narratologists ('any narrative manoeuvre that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later'),⁴² the second a Structural Prolepsis (anticipation of retrospection)⁴³ and the third a Rhetorical Prolepsis ('the anticipation of an objection and the preclusion of that objection by incorporating a counter-argument into the discourse.')⁴⁴ The first and third kinds of Prolepsis can be used within blog entries as in any other past tense narrative, though the future of the first is usually close to the time of the diegesis (since it must take place between the narrated time and the time in which the narrator is writing, and bloggers typically narrate events from their recent past). In interactive blog fiction, the future objections of the reader are significantly harder to preclude, as readers are able to voice their objections themselves. But it is Currie's second type of prolepsis that is of particular interest. This Structural Prolepsis is 'a form of anticipation which takes place between the time locus of the narrated and the time locus of the narrator.'⁴⁵ This is what Currie refers to as the 'anticipation of retrospection' or the notion that reading events expressed in the past tense by a character who narrates at a later time creates, 'a hermeneutic circle between the presentification of fictional narrative and the depresentification of lived experience.'⁴⁶ This has a particular relevance to epistolary fiction, since the account being written by the narrator is not only the site of retrospection on their prior activity, but the act of writing itself is implied to be taking place in anticipation of being read and looked back upon, either by the narrator, another character or the readers themselves. Currie explains Structural Prolepsis in the context of Derrida's *Archive Fever*,⁴⁷ saying that 'we increasingly experience the present as the object of a future memory'⁴⁸ and argues that this causes us to 'live life as if it weren't present and read fictional narrative as if it were.'⁴⁹ This concept is central to the themes of *Bad Influences*, and perhaps an implicit recurring theme of the blog fiction form: that of living vicariously through online activity. The act of blogging (for fictional and real people alike) privileges the past (which is being

⁴² Genette, p.40.

⁴³ Currie, p.46.

⁴⁴ Currie, p.31.

⁴⁵ Currie, p.31.

⁴⁶ Currie, p.86.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression (Religion and Postmodernism)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

⁴⁸ Currie, p.41.

⁴⁹ Currie, p.86.

narrated) over the present (which is being lived). Events have a greater sense of reality or significance for being related online, read by others, shared, liked and commented upon. This leads to the danger that false or misleading narratives on blogs are ascribed greater credence and priority than concerns of the present or the immediate future: a future which, in blog fiction more than traditional forms of epistolary, is unwritten and cannot be glimpsed by the curious reader flicking forward to the final page.

Distribution in Time and Relational Poetics

While this seems a pessimistic view of the phenomena of blogging and fiction in general, it gives blog fiction – with its real-time and interactive elements – the potential to connect stories and our involvement in those stories back to our lives. While it is true that the form emphasises the narrated past during reading, it nevertheless explicitly separates the diegetic (and literal) present from the narration, by implying the continued existence of the story between blog posts. In this way, it is possible that when a blog fiction reader finishes a post, they move out of the past, narrated story and into its present. Instead of being in the moment of narration with the narrative, as in an immersive novel, the blog fiction reader has continual reminders of being in the present with the character, wondering what they're doing *now* and anticipating them telling what happened next. So we come out of the narrative and enter straight into the comments in search of that direct communication, living in the present because it is where the text also lives. Real-time in blog fiction not only produces an experience of the passage of time in the story, it allows the story to influence the reader's awareness of the passage of time in their perceptions generally, giving the reader agency in the story along with a reminder of their agency to affect the real future.

The temporal relation between readers, characters and participants in *Bad Influences* invites agency not only in the story being blogged by the characters but by extension into the themes of the story as they relate to the readers' own stories. This manifests in features such as the utopian quiz,⁵⁰ the discussions throughout of trust and co-operation, isolation and community, the implicit invitation to share personal experience and give practical advice, as well as the ending that invites

⁵⁰ Emma Segar, 'Which Utopia are you Building?', *Bad Influences* [web page], 4 June 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk/take-part/which-utopia-are-you-building/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

readers to take up their own blog fictions in the story-world even as the characters step away from their blogs and into their new lives. Such features, which allow aspects of a blog fiction to seep into the real world (and aspects of the real world to influence the fiction) can make the readers' reality a form of framing narrative for the story, allowing for crossover between the diegesis and reality, or 'metalepsis',⁵¹ effected fully when readers comment on the blogs themselves. This metalepsis can bring the diegetic world and the real world together in the manner of an Augmented Reality Game (ARG) or Live Action Role Play (LARP). Narrative time is not, as in a novel, plastic or spatially determined. It is, as in ARGs, LARPs and interactive live performance, shared by the storyteller, players and non-player characters alike. Walker Rettberg notes the significance of this for unifying narratives distributed in time:

In effect, this is exactly what Aristotle's Unity of Time attempted: there should not be too large a gap between the fictional time and the time of the audience. If today's audience accesses media and narratives in fragments, making the narrative time correspond to the reader's time provides a new kind of dramatic unity.⁵²

As we have seen, the ways in which blog fiction uses real-time are not only formal and structural, but relational. It is not just real-time narrative but narrative time itself that is inherently relational, in that it is common to the characters and keeps them in the same diegesis. As Ricoeur says in 'Narrative Time':

[...] the art of storytelling retains this public character of time while keeping it from falling into anonymity. It does so, first, as time common to the actors, as time woven in common by their interaction. [...] they can say 'now' and say it 'together.'⁵³

Through its use of real-time, blog fiction puts the reader in the narrative timeframe of the storyworld with the characters, thereby including the readers in this direct relation, allowing them to say 'now' and say it together with the characters.

⁵¹ Rimmon-Kenan, p.60.

⁵² Walker, 'Distributed Narrative', p.5.

⁵³ Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Time', in *The Narrative Reader* ed. by Martin McQuillan (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.255-261, p.260.

While it may be the formal elements, such as serialisation, epistolary and the distribution of narrative in time that construct this effect, it is the readers' (and writers') immersion in the text – or, perhaps, their integration of the text into their lives – that constructs the experience of real-time, making live blog fiction an intrinsically and intensely relational mode of the form, in which readers, participants and characters exist within a shared time-frame and are implied into each other's worlds. Nevertheless, the reader of blog fiction in its archived form still reads relationally, and may even experience a form of metalepsis through their requirement to untangle the linearity of the text. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Distribution in Space: Multi-linearity and the blog fiction archive

I was aware, as I was planning and writing *Bad Influences*, that it would exist in two separate incarnations, but it was only after the live posting of the blogs was complete that I had the opportunity to compare them. I knew that completing the serialisation would remove the real-time element and create browsing options with the potential to alter the whole structure of the narrative, and I had predicted that reading the completed archive would prompt very different relations to the text than following the live blogs. However, it was only when I set about reading through the completed archive that I realised the extent of this impact. For example, after Mei's disappearance, the reader would be able to see instantly that there was another entry on her blog, and be faced with a choice: navigate directly to Mei's next entry, skipping the intervening months, or read the other characters' blogs up to that point first, knowing (as they do not) that Mei will eventually return. Being outside of the characters' timeframe gives readers a different perspective, and the option to choose a route through the intersecting paths of the four narratives to construct their own experiences of the text. At the time of posting I was primarily writing and editing for the live audience, who were interacting with me and making me aware of their predictions and interpretations as the story progressed. I was only vaguely aware of this other, future audience, whose experience would be more akin to mine as I sorted through the completed draft on my digital calendar, deciding upon the order in which to post the entries, moving them around and choosing which to realise next.

From Live to Archive

The idea of serialised fiction changing its format upon completion is far from new, and was a key feature of many Victorian novels. However, Janet Murray notes an aspect of the digital literature archive that goes beyond a simple collected and re-edited edition of a previously serialised work:

Cyberdramatists would [...] have the same advantage of writing for two kinds of audiences - the actively engaged real-time viewers [...] and the more reflective long-term audience [...] But the digital storyteller would also be aware of a third audience: the navigational viewer who takes

pleasure in following the connections between different parts of the story and in discovering multiple arrangements of the same material.¹

While it was possible to navigate around and between the characters' blogs while *Bad Influences* was still live, it was a different experience to browse in the knowledge that the story was complete and could be read in its entirety. Navigating the text at this point ceased to be a way of 'catching up' to the live story, and became an alternative mode of constructing the narrative as a whole.

It is tempting to describe these two incarnations as dynamic and static versions of blog fiction, but it soon becomes obvious that the archive is anything but static. Marie-Laure Ryan defines narrative interactivity through the combination of two oppositions: internal/external (being inside the story as a character, or remaining outside as a reader) and ontological/exploratory (being able to take actions that affect the story or merely navigating its pathways).² According to this definition, the change from live to archived blog fiction shifts the mode of interaction from internal-ontological (the reader, or their metaleptic counterpart, can enter the text and affect it) to external-exploratory (the reader observes the text from outside, but can navigate a path through it.) The archive is hyperlinked, searchable and – though no longer ontological – retains the possibility of reciprocal interaction. Comments left on the posts of a completed blog fiction can no longer affect the outcome of the story, but it is still possible for this interaction to prompt some response, either from the writer or from other readers. Walker Rettberg notes that what is posted in a blog has 'persistence' that is lacking in many other forms of conversation – both online and in person. She also notes that, because both blog structures and search rankings place the most recent post first, 'The archive also allows slow conversations.'³ However, Ruth Page points out that 'Completed narratives that are posted in their entirety are unlikely to be revised and then reposted, even in the light of published review comments.'⁴ As time goes on, the likelihood of new readers finding the text diminishes, as does that of reciprocal

¹Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p.257.

²Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Beyond Myth and Metaphor - The Case of Narrative in Digital Media', *Game Studies*, 1.1 (July 2001), <<http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>> [03-06-2015].

³Jill Walker Rettberg, *Bloggging*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p.65.

⁴Ruth Page, 'Interactivity and Interaction: Text and Talk in Online Communities', in *Intermediality and Storytelling* ed. by Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan, Narratologia: Contributions to Narrative Theory (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp.208-231, p.218.

interactions. Though it is not necessarily immediate upon the story's completion, there comes a point at which the possibility for internal, metaleptic interaction with the blog fiction is over, and the only interaction it offers is the exploration of the archive. At this point, time ceases to be the primary mode of the narrative's distribution, and its spatial distributions become far more significant.

Distribution in Space

Walker Rettberg points specifically to blogs when she explains that:

Any weblog is distributed in time, but the narrative can also be distributed in space when the narrative on an individual weblog is combined with textual performance in other media [...]⁵

She gives examples of fictional or semi-fictional blogs in which the protagonist communicates to readers via other social media in addition to their blog, or through comments on other blogs besides their own. In the case of *Bad Influences*, we can think of the four blogs as the spaces over which the narrative is distributed, and the means of navigating between them as the unifying factor that creates their narrative relation.

However, a number of multiple-character blog fictions (e.g. *Peep This Diary*, *The Urban 30*) place all the characters' entries on a single blog, implying that those characters collaborate on a single project and thereby simplifying the spatial distribution, keeping the text on one site for ease of access. While I created an aggregated feed on the *Bad Influences* site for much the same purpose, it was important that the four blogs also existed separately, establishing the characters' independence from one another and giving me the opportunity to assert each character's identity through the design and layout of their online space, so that it could function as a form of visual exposition. The separation of these four narrative spaces multiplies the options the reader has in navigating them. The connection of those spaces both diegetically (through the characters' comments on one another's blogs) and textually (through the *Bad Influences* site that links to the blogs and aggregates their feeds) unifies the blogs into one narrative, the first by describing the relations of the characters to each other and the second by

⁵Jill Walker, 'Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks' in *IR 5.0* held by Association of Internet Researchers at Brighton (21 September 2004) <<http://jilltxt.net/txt/Walker-AoIR-3500words.pdf>> [03-06-2015], (p.8).

providing the means for the readers to relate to the blogs through various sequential paths of navigation.

Bell, Ensslin and Rustad point out that ‘Each reading of a digital fiction is different, either because the reader takes a different pathway through the text or because the text offers a different version of itself.’⁶ The path a reader takes through *Bad Influences* could depend on a number of factors: which character holds their interest the longest, which platform they choose to read through (the blogs themselves or the aggregated feeds), which reading order they choose (chronological or reverse-chronological), whether they read methodically from a starting point to its logical conclusion or ‘dip’ in and out, clicking randomly on categories and post titles of interest. With these options in mind, it is easier to understand how – though a blog fiction does not alter its text with each reading, as some hypertext stories do – different readings can produce very different experiences of the text.

Linearity and multi-linearity

These navigational paths, like those in hypertext fiction, raise questions of linearity. While the narrative does not stop being linear when the live blog fiction is complete, the increased navigational options complicate that linearity. The chronological sequence of posts can be de-emphasised in favour of a particular character’s story, or a particular view of events. During serialisation, the self-contained posts that make up a blog fiction act as episodes with a clear chronological order, but in the archive they become hypertextual lexia: individual segments of text connected by hyperlinks to create, in George Landow’s words: ‘text that is experienced as non-linear, or, more properly, as multilinear or multisequential.’⁷ As Walker Rettberg explains, in *Blogging*:

When blogs tell stories, they generally do so in an episodic form, with each post being a self-contained unit that contributes to an overall

⁶Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad, (Eds.), *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Stylistics (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), p.5.

⁷George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalisation*, Prallax Revisions of Culture and Society (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p.3.

narrative. Each post makes sense in itself, but read together - not necessarily in sequence - the posts tell a larger story.⁸

That episodes can still be understood and appreciated out of sequence is important in ascribing a degree of agency to the reader in the creation of meaning, given that (as Rimmon-Kenan shows) meanings can be altered by the order in which events are read:

Thus, placing an item at the beginning or at the end may radically change the process of reading as well as the final product. Interestingly [...] both the primacy and recency effects may be so strong as to overshadow the meanings and attitudes which would have emerged from a full and consistent integration of the data of the text.⁹

The reader's agency to choose a path through the text thus changes – or, at least, strongly influences – the way that meaning is constructed. The re-ordering of the blog entries does not, as in some computer games and hypertext stories, change the narrative events themselves, but *can* change the emphasis and perspective on those events. Reading Jack's revelation prior to previous entries of *Bad Influences*, for instance, would make his motivations clearer, and so may affect the extent to which the reader sympathises with him, holds him accountable for his behaviour or forgives him for it. Mei's later revelations, too – especially her eventual ability to be blunt with Jack about her lack of feelings for him – cast a different light on her early idealism, naivety and tact. Depending on the sequence they have prioritised, a reader may wonder what events have caused Mei to change so drastically, or may even doubt her early sincerity in light of her later decisions, and consider her early behaviour more evasive than tactful.

This ability to read effect prior to cause means that a reading of a blog fiction in its archived incarnation has less reliance on suspense and the gradual exposition of plot than that of the live version. While *Bad Influences* may well contain physical conflict and jeopardy, there is not much true suspense to be found outside of the live comment threads, as the very fact that a character has posted to their blog

⁸Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, p.115.

⁹Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, New Accents (London: Routledge, 1983), p.120-121.

ensures their survival – so far – of any perilous event they narrate there. Like most ulterior epistolary, blog fiction lends itself to discursive introspection more than fast-paced, dramatic action. Like a novel being read for the second time, it can allow the reading of instigating events with the sense of tragic or ironic inevitability inherent in a foreknowledge of their effects. However, unlike the re-reading, the causes are not yet known by the reader who has chanced upon their effects, and may still surprise or deepen understanding, especially where the connection between cause and effect hinges upon a discovery of new facets of the characters and their relationships. The interest in *Bad Influences* is less in what the characters do than in how it changes them. It is not their actions but their interactions that develop into denouements and conclusions, the most significant of these being Mei's reappearance following Jack's confessions. The resolution inherent in this exchange relies much more on the influences Mei and Jack have on one another's viewpoints, and the changes of perspective that these influences prompt, than on the events that they are narrating. No matter the reading order, the events remain unchanged: it is perspective and character identification that shifts.

Because of the tendency of chronological linearity to reassert itself, the level of agency inherent in the ability to re-sequence unchanging events (rather than create fresh storylines) is the subject of much discussion amongst critics of digital and interactive fiction, some of whom question whether this truly counts as interaction. Friedrich uses hypertext as an example of Ryan's exploratory interaction, but excludes blog fiction from this category, saying that:

Fictional blogs [...] never fit either of the exploratory models [internal-exploratory and external-exploratory] of interaction. While a reader certainly can explore a blog by clicking and reading through archives and comments, the act of exploration does not change the reader's perception of the text, as it does in hypertext.¹⁰

In *Screening the Page/Paging the Screen*, Marjorie Perloff goes further in limiting the agency of readers in all hypertext fiction:

¹⁰Betsy Friedrich, *Fictional Blogs: How Digital Narratives are Changing the Way We Read and Write* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Coe College, 2007), pp.13-14.

True, viewers can trace their own path through a given electronic text, decide whether to move from A to B or B to Q, whether to rearrange word groups and stanzas, and so on. But is such activity really any more 'interactive' than, say, The Sims games [...] Indeed, the input is rigidly predetermined by the largely anonymous authors and programmers.¹¹

Since all the lexia in an archived blog fiction are pre-determined, and their chronology is rigidly linear, can an exploratory interaction truly give the reader a form of agency in perception beyond that of, say, the reader of a printed novel with an annotated bookmark at the start of each chapter? Alice Bell points out that this method of reading print is unlikely, while 'the navigational features afforded by Web technology explicitly encourage navigational exploration in a way that the codex does not.'¹² A print reader would have to deal with a novel bristling with bookmarks on every page to replicate the exploratory potential of multiple blogs combined with other potentially non-chronological re-ordering methods, such as tags and categories. Dismissing exploratory interaction on this basis fails to take into account how significantly digital technologies can expand our capacity to explore and understand a chronologically linear narrative through alternative logical sequences. In Geoff Ryman's hypertext story *253*, the reader explores (in any order, with multiple navigational options) two-hundred-and-fifty-three individual character profiles, each including a perspective of the final two minutes and fifty-three seconds of the journey of the London tube train on which they are travelling, as well as seven accounts of the final few seconds in each carriage before the train crashes. By Friedrich and Perloff's arguments, we could say that *253* is not truly exploratory because there is a linear chronology, the text provided does not change and the seats on the train are numbered, so that we must mentally return all the passengers to their allotted seats for their 'end of the line' scenes, no matter the order in which we read them. But this would fail to take into account the equally meaningful and more memorable links we follow between the characters on the basis of background, involvement in various companies or organisations and other random connections that navigate between them.

¹¹Marjorie Perloff, 'Screening the Page/Paging the Screen: Digital Poetics and the Differential Text', in *New Media Poetics: contexts, technotexts, and theories* ed. by Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2006), pp.143-164, p.144.

¹²Alice Bell, 'Media-Specific Metalepsis in 10:01', in *Analyzing Digital Fiction* ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad, Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Stylistics (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp.21-38, p.28.

Similarly, non-chronological associations are possible in blog entries, especially in blog fictions containing multiple blogs. While common hypertext devices, such as associative linking through key words scattered throughout the text, are difficult to accomplish on a blog, the medium has its own associative devices. In *Bad Influences* I used the Wordpress 'categories' feature to group together posts on particular themes or issues within each individual blog, but this device could have wider-ranging uses. It would be possible to use tags with unique codes in order to bring together specific posts from a number of blogs into significant sets. The use of more common keywords as tags could even prompt readers to explore a theme in a wider collection of Wordpress posts outside of the blog fiction, unpredictable even to the writer. Some hypertext stories (e.g. Michael Joyce's *Afternoon: A Story*) use looping paths that – after a certain number of turns or a certain ordering of lexia – give previously unavailable options, making new lexia accessible only when the loop has been travelled a number of times. While blogging platforms are not set up to emulate these more complex, deliberately constructed webs of conditional links between lexia, many do allow individual posts to be password-protected, and in *Bad Influences* I used this to show characters having private conversations, with the passwords shared on social media so that these entries will be accessible to regular readers, while not open to all the fictional bloggers. It would also be possible to write a blog fiction that hides passwords to some posts in others, requiring readers to solve a problem or follow a non-chronological path in order to unlock entries that reveal essential plot points (perhaps in the blog of a time traveller).

In these ways, while the story itself may remain linear and chronological within an archived blog fiction, the reader's path through it need not be entirely constrained by that sequence. While these devices may not be as extensive or as structurally significant in blog fiction as those of hypertext, they can be used to make important thematic connections or highlight contrasts between characters and situations, and – more importantly – to put their prioritisation in the hands of the reader, allowing for individual, significantly differing experiences and interpretations of the same text. Murray points out a potential outcome of these different readings when she says:

A linear story has to end in some one place: the last shot of a movie is never a split screen. But a multi-threaded story can offer many voices at once without giving any one of them the last word.¹³

If, as Friedrich and Perloff suggest, these devices merely re-order an inescapable linearity with an inevitable conclusion, the reader's ultimate experience is unchanged by their path, and the 'agency' of the reader in choosing that path has no significance. However, if (as Murray suggests) the choice of path or viewpoint works to de-prioritise any one conclusion – or even gives the reader agency over which conclusions to prioritise – then in spite of the perception of linearity remaining intact, the emphasis the reader has chosen changes their experience significantly.

In traditional novels with multiple viewpoints, the writer's control over the textual sequence tends to favour a viewpoint, usually that of the character whose account reveals or concludes any given narrative thread. In archived blog fiction, the reader encounters viewpoints on a single plot event either randomly or through conscious choice, so that even if they do follow the sequence as it was originally posted, the act of navigation makes this an active decision, as influential on perspective as any other. Each navigation prioritises a particular theme, character or some other factor that the writer may not even have predicted, depending on the reader's reasons for their choice. Each navigation, therefore, is a genuine interaction, actively shaping the reader's relation to the text, influencing the perspectives and priorities that inform their reading of the subsequent lexia, and their reflection on the previous ones.

Endings

This open, associative and exploratory structure resists reduction to a single reading order or perspective, which (as Murray implies, above) raises the question of how to establish conclusive endings. *Bad Influences* shares with much hypertext a sense of ambiguity in its resolution. J. Yellowlees Douglas points out that:

We are accustomed to dealing with texts that end more prematurely than their stories would seem to, but what do we do with a text that, a bit

¹³Murray, pp.136-137

like a book made of sand, has pages we cannot properly count and nothing like end titles or hard covers to contain it? And, when you stop reading, what is really finished: the stories--or you?¹⁴

Not all of this applies to blog fiction. Many hypertext stories have no way of determining a beginning or end point, or of knowing how many lexia exist and what percentage of them the reader has discovered, while Blog fiction's timestamps and archive can at least determine that there are a limited number of extant posts, each with visibly unique identifiers, so that a reader knows whether they have read everything that is there to read. Most will also be read in some rational sequence that defines a beginning and end point, whether these are determined chronologically or by other means. However, having read a blog and its comment threads, there is no guarantee that some of those comment threads won't continue to grow, or that a fictional blogger might not return one day and continue the story that appeared to have ended. This leaves the reader to decide how long a blog has to remain without updates before they consider the story to be complete. In fact, given that a real-time fictional universe has an implied lifespan beyond that of the narratives situated within it, this prompts the question of whether the blogger ever really stopped blogging, or whether the reader just stopped reading. In *Bad Influences*, Mei and Elaine clearly announce their intention to leave their blogs, but the other characters' final posts remain open to interpretation. Ash states that his blog will no longer be a priority, but does not say outright that he will never post again. Jack appears keen to continue, but has already established that he often fails to follow through on such ambitions, especially when he has other distractions. Should the reader take Ash and Jack's silence for apathy, change of priorities, technical difficulties, death? I decided not to make this clear, to leave the imagined ending to the reader, for reasons that are very much related to the nature of blogs.

Personal blogs are often begun because of a particular event or issue that the blogger wishes to address.¹⁵ Once that event is over or the issue resolved (or the blogger has decided it cannot be resolved and made their peace with that conclusion), the blog serves no purpose and can only become repetitive and self-

¹⁴J. Yellowlees Douglas, *The End of Books or Books Without End: Reading Interactive Narratives* (USA: Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2001), p.62.

¹⁵Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, p.118.

indulgent. Often blogs end because real life gets in the way – or, perhaps, because the blog has ceased to be rewarding enough to continue to get in the way of real life. A blog is the blogger's communication to the world of their perspective on the world. When their perspective shifts, the blog can no longer serve its original function. The blogger may try to change that function, or to start a new blog, but either way the original followers have been abandoned. The implication, when the characters in *Bad Influences* cease blogging, is that they have moved on, and the reader must now do the same. The ending of *Bad Influences* was intended to transfer the responsibility for closure to the reader, just as all the bloggers have transferred their attention away from living through their blogs and towards finding a place and purpose in the world around them.

Much blog fiction has even less explicit closure than *Bad Influences*. Blogs based on historical or otherwise familiar characters tend to lack plot, ending when the writer, readers or both feel that the point or the joke has been exhausted. As we saw in Chapter 2, even plot-based blog fiction is rarely planned in great detail in advance of being posted, and it is rare for writers to schedule their plot events and ensure they reach a timely conclusion. For many, blog fiction is a chance to improvise a story that they can perhaps edit into a more coherent, publishable form afterwards. Relatively few blog fictions ever reach a conclusion, and it is not unusual to find them abandoned with an apologetic author's note for the final post, or more often without a word of explanation. One reason for this could be that most blog fiction is written with the live incarnation very much taking priority over the potential archive, always with a view to expanding elements that the writer and readers are enjoying at the time, rather than creating a complete, coherent narrative. Rimmon-Kenan speaks of the process of narrative resolution generally in these terms:

Following the introduction of the enigma, the text establishes a paradoxical process [...]: on the one hand, it seems to be pushing toward a solution, while on the other it endeavours to maintain the enigma as long as possible in order to secure its own existence. It thus

introduces various retardatory devices, such as snare (misleading clue), equivocation, blockage, suspended answer, partial answer.¹⁶

Without planning, this process can lead to indefinite evasion. While there is enthusiasm for an ongoing serial, there is no reason to bring it to a conclusion. If there is no longer enjoyment in it, the writer's final energy goes into trying to revive earlier interest. If this succeeds, the story continues, as before. If it fails, this leaves little motivation to see the story through to a conclusion, and it is abandoned. As Walker Rettberg notes:

While Brooks discussed the novel reader's desire to reach the end, a blog reader's desire is instead always for the next post. The blog reader hopes that there is no end. An end would not tie up all the loose ends, answer the questions and make the narrative into a neat, comprehensible whole. It would simply be a stop.¹⁷

This could be said for serials generally. From the *Sherlock Holmes* stories to modern soap operas, serials elicit such enthusiasm from readers that writers have been forced to resurrect dead heroes and continue stories beyond their intended conclusions. However, blog fiction behaves more like hypertext than the serial novel in this respect. While the sense of immersion and attachment to characters is significant (as we will see in Chapter 4), it is not this but the lack of structural narrative closure that prevents the sense of conclusion. Many blog fiction writers are simply not working towards an end point, and so readers stop reading (and writers stop writing) not when a denouement completes the narrative arc but when they sense that they have gleaned all the understanding or knowledge or amusement they can from the blog, what Murray calls 'closure as exhaustion, not as completion.'¹⁸ Many readers find this unsatisfying, as James Pope found when he presented a test group of readers with hypertext stories. He notes that his participants felt that, 'without some *author-designed* endplace, the whole narrative feels as if it is unfinished.'¹⁹ and he concludes that, '[...] writers who wish to please

¹⁶Rimmon-Kenan, pp.126-7.

¹⁷Walker Rettberg, *Bloggng*, p.118.

¹⁸Murray, p.174.

¹⁹James Pope, 'A Future for Hypertext Fiction', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 12.4 (November 2006), pp.447-465 (p.454).

'ordinary' readers will have to find ways of offering something interactive and non-linear, combined with something essentially Aristotelian.'²⁰

In blog fiction, this Aristotelian expectation of narrative unity can be achieved through re-unifying the distributed narrative. However, time (in the live version) and space (in the archive) are only two of the dimensions over which the narrative is distributed. The four separate blogs of *Bad Influences*, though virtual spaces, signify the geographical distribution of the characters. The unification of these virtual spaces on the main site only accentuates the separateness of the four characters' geographical locations, creating an expectation that the characters will be reunited for their conclusion. However, my conclusion to this aspect of *Bad Influences*' distribution in space was not to resolve so much as accept it. This seemed unfinished to my readers, not because the direction of that resolution was unexpected (though it was), but because it was unconventional and unsatisfying. The comments and hyperlinks that unified the characters' distribution in space were not drawn in to pull them back together but severed, parting them permanently. The ending of the blogs left those spaces scattered rather than unified. The characters' variously expressed desires to see one another again will never be fulfilled. When they make their peace with this, they leave their blogs – and each other – behind. However, in its live incarnation, distributed in real-time as well as virtual space, *Bad Influences* implies a continuation of the story (time hasn't stopped, after all) while ending the text itself, leaving the readers with the option to let the characters go and return to their own lives, or to continue through the creation of their own apocalypse blog and participation in a 'survivors' forum'. This was aimed at promoting and discussing blog fictions created by readers of *Bad Influences*, which my characters could potentially participate in. However, there had not been as many participating readers as I had hoped, and as the conversation continued between the remaining characters and the one remaining active participant, I realised I would have to stop responding if I did not wish to compromise the idea of 'moving on' that comprised the story's end. Rather than becoming non-committal bit-parts in other people's stories, as I had hoped, Ash and Jack looked set to remain staple characters on the forum, expected to give

²⁰Pope, p.462.

regular updates on their own lives, and that presented me with a dilemma. Murray posits that:

The ending of a hyperserial would not be a single note, as in a standard adventure drama, but a resolving chord, the sensation of several overlapping viewpoints coming into focus.²¹

While none of the characters' stories were unequivocally concluded, I wanted to leave each of them with a sense of having overcome the major scenario or quandary they had been grappling with, having discovered what they wish to do next. My intention was that this commonality would provide enough of a 'resolving chord' to give the crossover narrative a satisfying sense of conclusion, while the success or failure of each of the characters' individual narratives remained open to speculation. Elaine even offers multiple speculative proleptic endings to her story, and invites each reader to imagine her as they will, as if this may help her to escape her fate (and in a sense, it does). Behind the harmony of their collective decision to move on, the implicit conclusions of the characters' final decisions both endorse one another ('don't be alone') and oppose one another ('communities are dangerous'), rather than chiming in complete concordance, in what Rimmon-Kenan calls 'undecidability':

Instead of closure there is a perpetual oscillation between two possibilities. Some texts (mainly modern) seem designed so as to prevent the formation of any 'finalized hypothesis' or overall meaning by making various items undermine each other or cancel each other out, without forming neatly opposed possibilities.²²

This allowed for the potential to break that ending note if an event in another blog fiction were to prompt a meaningful relation to somebody else's story, but I did not want to either continue my characters' stories indefinitely, or finalise them in ways that would relieve readers of the responsibility of finding their own perspectives and conclusions. The nature of the distributed narrative gives each blog a level of independent legitimacy that is hard to collapse into a single conclusion. Each reader may have a favourite or agree more with some characters than others, as

²¹Murray, pp.257-258.

²²Rimmon-Kenan, p125.

did I, but any ending that privileged one of those viewpoints above the others would rob the other three of their significance. It would be crass to reward the characters with the 'right' analysis with survival and kill off the undeserving, or to kill them all off, regardless. By the same token, it would be inane to leave any or all of them in a definitively successful utopian community. Instead, my aim for concluding *Bad Influences* was to bring each of the characters through experiences that changed or clarified their outlook and plans for the future, and leave them all with the possibility of hope or horror. This leaves the reader to realise – much as most of the characters did – that online communities might be emotionally rewarding and of some practical benefit in the short-term, but ultimately a fixation on people who you cannot reach is destructive and there comes a time to shift the focus to your own situation and those around you. The encouragement for readers to start their own apocalyptic blogs turns this point into a cyclical process. It is through the act of blogging and relating to strangers that the characters came to the realisation that they must move on, and acquired a measure of the confidence and skills that they needed to do so. Now it is the turn of the people brought together by those blogs to do the same, until the point that they, too, are ready to move on. Some of my readers found this unsatisfying, and wanted to know what happened to the characters next, but they cannot. They can only realise that, in the end, the characters' fates do not matter – what matters is the influence that they had on the readers as they determine their own.

Heise compares two major narratological analyses of closure this way:

[...] whereas Benjamin, Kermode and Brooks interpret closure as a narrative reflection of the individual's biologically closed future, Schwantz reads it as a procedure designed to make time tellable in the face of a historical future too open and contingent to lend itself to narrative phrasing.²³

The live version of *Bad Influences* ends by inviting the reader into that open future, or perhaps by pointing out that they will inevitably inhabit it. In the archive, through active agency over navigational interactions that establish perspective, readers engage with this ending, having to recognise the severing of their connection to

²³Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism*, Literature, Culture, Theory (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.49.

the characters and take those perspectives and influences into their own lives in order to gain a sense of closure from the story. Just as the characters let go of their blogs to go into their lives, the reader is asked to let go of their need for vicarious closure through others' stories in order to pursue their own story. And so, in spite of the interaction with the archive being spatial, external and navigational – as opposed to the temporal, internal and ontological interactions available in the live blog fiction – it is still a highly relational mode of reading with the potential to influence real, human interactions beyond the text. These interactions, surrounding both the live and archived texts, are the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Distribution of Authorship: Curating Collaborative Conclusions

It is clear that interactivity is an inherent part of the process of reading blog fiction, whether in its live or archived incarnations. It is impossible to read a blog fiction without either choosing a place to start and a reading order, or implicitly entering the storyworld by accessing the live blogs in real-time. There are also more explicit modes of interaction: commenting on the blogs themselves and participating in the storyworld, or discussing the story in the social media platforms that surround it. I wanted to use these interactive elements to engage readers in the themes and scenarios of *Bad Influences*, to enhance identification with the characters and immersion in the storyworld, even to offer locations within that storyworld to readers as settings to develop their own characters and stories. However, I did not want to let reader interaction alter the events and locations that affected my characters. I had a story that I wanted to tell, which I hoped my readers would enjoy and trust me to tell, collaborating and participating rather than usurping it by, say, detonating a nuclear bomb or declaring that a benevolent state had developed a cure and would save everybody. I wanted to give the themes inherent in the disaster tradition room to breathe, to watch societies collapse and communities form in order to explore the politics of disaster, the dystopian and utopian possibilities, the horror and wish-fulfilment fantasies of the apocalyptic imagination. I wanted to distribute the authorship of *Bad Influences* to an extent that would enhance the readers' engagement with these themes and give them the autonomy to apply them to their own and their characters' situations, without allowing those themes or situations to be rendered irrelevant by excessively destructive forces or easy solutions. In collaborative fiction, much as in utopian visions themselves, the elusive aim is to create an ideal balance between freedom of the individual and responsibility to the community. The community's concern, in this case, is the maintenance of an engaging, interactive storyworld. Total participant autonomy and total creator control are both incompatible with this goal. The task of a good curator is to achieve a balance resulting in a consistent story that readers are able to contribute to in meaningful ways during their immersion in its world. If that balance fails, it results in either a story so unyielding as to make any interaction frustratingly restrictive, or a free-for-all in which the participants'

total control over action and consequence rob the storyworld of the coherence that drew them to it in the first place.

Blog Fiction and the Double Plot

We have seen in the last two chapters how readers can shape a blog fiction through two of Marie Laure-Ryan's forms of interaction: internal-ontological (metaleptic participation within the text) and external-exploratory (active navigation of a path through the text).¹ There is another applicable form of interaction that remains to be covered:² External-ontological, that of the direct interactions between readers and writers beyond the text, which can significantly influence the story.

Blog fiction is not the only form in which the narrative is influenced by interaction both within and beyond the text. Players of MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) often speak to one another out of character to coordinate their in-game actions, while both live and table-top role-playing games can be effectively paused while players clarify a rule, consider the potential outcomes of a suggested action or roll dice for combat. These exchanges clearly have a strong influence on the narrative, though they take place outside of it. Similarly, readers and writers can discuss serialised online fiction in a variety of fora beyond the text itself. Many blog fictions use comment sections for this purpose, treating everything beyond the post itself as an explicitly external discussion forum. Others allow the comments more ambiguity. Readers can interact in or out of character, ask a question or comment on their enjoyment of the blog, and so long as the fictional blogger expects readers to interact in this way this need not disturb the integrity of the storyworld. In their introduction to *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, Bell, Ensslin and Rustad reference Brian McHale's idea that 'Fiction's epidermis [...] is not an impermeable but a semipermeable membrane.'³

¹ Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Beyond Myth and Metaphor - The Case of Narrative in Digital Media', *Game Studies*, 1.1 (July 2001) <<http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>> [03-06-2015].

² There is also Internal-exploratory interaction, but this is not really applicable to blog fiction as it specifically involves first-person interaction within a mapped world, as in many adventure and combat-based computer games, text adventures etc. It could perhaps be said to apply to a participant who explores a path between the live blogs while reading and thinking as their metaleptic counterpart, but this stretches the concept a little.

³ Brian McHale, *Postmodern Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), p.34.

It is as though part of the fictional world leaks into the actual world crossing [...] a 'semipermeable membrane' through which both worlds seem to be uncannily accessible to one [an]other [sic].⁴

However, where interactivity is as direct and open as in much blog fiction, this membrane may be more than semipermeable, leaving the storyworld's narrative integrity vulnerable if, for instance, a comment references the characters or events as fictional, or directly address the writer. This danger can be averted, to an extent, by the provision of a space for out-of-character interaction, from which the story can be influenced indirectly and the conventions for direct interaction established. In 'Wreading Together', Isabell Klaiber describes these interactions surrounding the text as a secondary plot within the 'double plot' of collaborative fiction,⁵ in which the plot of the story's development unfolds alongside the primary plot of the story itself. The inhabitants of this space include the writers, creators or curators of the story, along with participants, players and commentators who discuss the story with them out of character. Beyond this secondary plot are those who experience the story without any involvement in its construction: readers and reviewers who make no attempt to participate in the story or to discuss it with those who are doing so. The spaces of the secondary plot can act as a protective barrier around the semipermeable membrane, a second line of defence for the primary plot. In preventing access to the primary plot without first becoming part of – or, at least, aware of – a community that curates it, the secondary plot guards against accidental damage through reckless interaction.

⁴ Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad, (Eds.), *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Stylistics (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), p.32.

⁵ Isabell Klaiber, 'Wreading Together: The Double Plot of Collaborative Digital Fiction', in *Analyzing Digital Fiction* ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad, Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Stylistics (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp.124-142, p. 128.

In *Bad Influences*, the secondary plot took place on the *Under the Influence* blog, the Facebook page, the Twitter account and the e-mail and feedback forms made available on the main website. Participants in the primary plot had to come through this site (and so become aware of the secondary plot) since they were obliged to submit an agreement, confirming that they had read the participation guidelines, prior to commenting on the character blogs. These guidelines made it clear that the comments on the character blogs were solely for in-character, primary plot interaction. Most blog fiction is less formal in these arrangements, and conventions tend to be improvised and negotiated organically as the text progresses.

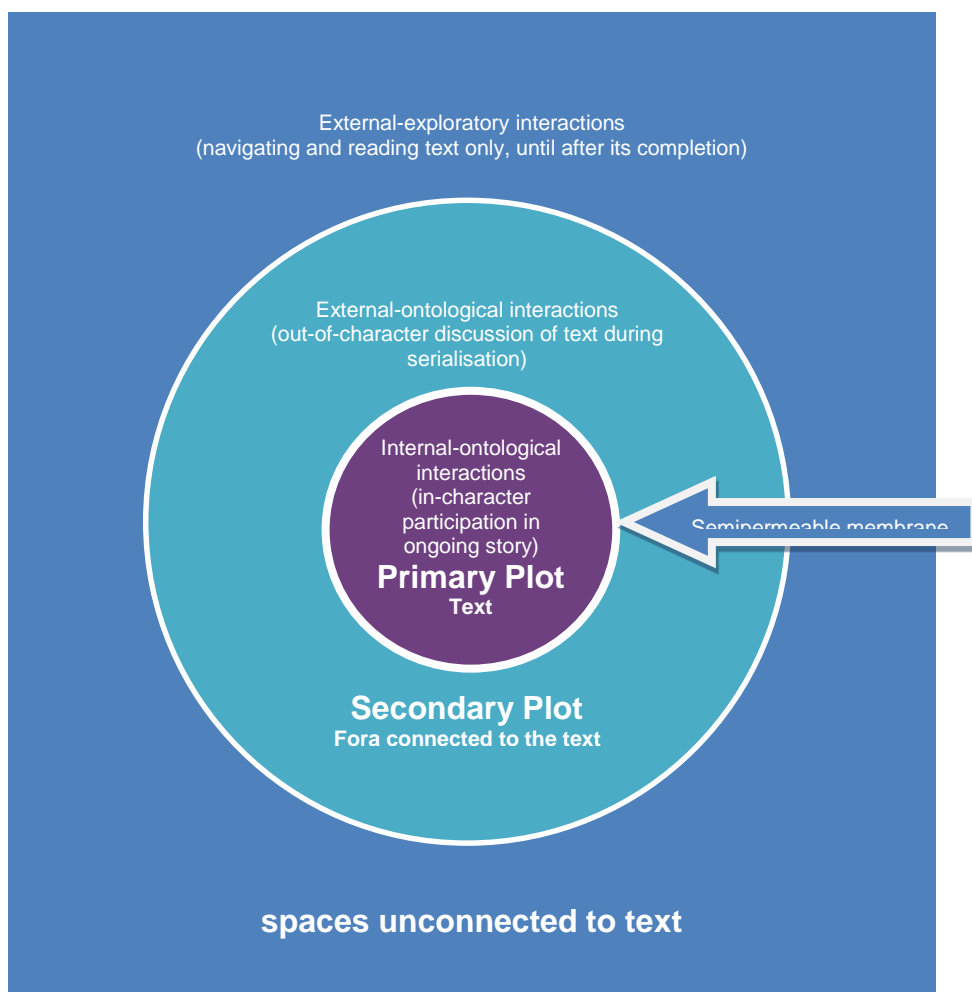


Figure 3 Illustration of the text and its interactive spaces, combining Ryan's 'types of interactivity' (Ryan, 2001) and Klaiber's 'double plot' analysis (Klaiber, 2014), an expansion of Klaiber's diagram.

Commentary mixing addresses to the character and to the writer is less problematic in character blogs, where the central conceit is the fictional or historical nature of the blogger, not the veracity of the storyworld. *Geoffrey*

Chaucer Hath a Blog elicits commentary ranging from attempts to play along in Middle English to direct speculation on the writer's identity. Crucially, though, there are still unbroken conventions, the most noteworthy being the refusal of the writer to break character, completing all commentary and e-mail correspondence in an accessible form of mock Middle English and signing as 'le vostre GC'. All enquiries after the blogger's 'real identity' were met with insistence that the blog was written by Galfridus Chaucer, and exasperation at these attempts to refute his reality, until the publication of his book.⁶ In this way, Bryant extended the primary plot into surrounding arenas and eliminated both the spaces in which a secondary plot might have developed and the requirement for one, instead overriding attempts to draw attention to the blog's fictional nature by playfully adapting the storyworld to include anything the participants threw at it. This is only one of the ways in which blog fictions that set no particular limits or explicit conventions on the use of commentary nevertheless maintain a degree of consistency, based on the creator's own usage, from which participants take their cue.

The double plot and distributed authorship

This double plot analysis suggests two distinct modes of distributed authorship in blog fiction. Internal distribution, taking place within the primary plot, distributes authorship in the very literal sense of inviting participants to write elements of the story, putting their own words into the blog in the form of comments. External distribution, in the secondary plot, provides implicit or explicit opportunities to participate in the decisions that determine story events, character development, style, pace and theme.

The influence of communities surrounding a text has long been a factor in the development of narratives in serialised fiction, but the practicalities of publication and broadcast mean that, in reality, most instalments of a serialised text are completed long before their release and can only be influenced by audience response in the long-term. However, in a blog fiction – even one that, like *Bad Influences*, is fully drafted prior to posting – a writer is able to edit, add, omit and rearrange posts at will, up to moments before they go live, so that feedback from readers can have an immediate effect on the story. Some blog fiction even relies

⁶ Brantley L. Bryant, *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog: Medieval Studies and New Media*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

on reader commentary to determine the direction of the story. In *Giant Girl Rampages*,⁷ fictional blogger Melly Mills frequently asks for advice and ideas from her readers, and on one occasion needs participants to spot hints that she has missed and tell her what to do to progress the plot.⁸ Elizabeth Baines' *What Would You Do?*⁹ did not include the comments in the primary plot, but invited readers to vote in a poll at the end of each post to determine the fictional blogger's next action. Most blog fiction is more subtle in the influence it allows its readership. When Chester Burton spoke to Friedrich about *Simon of Space*,¹⁰ he noted:

whenever reader speculation got uncomfortably close to uncovering a future plot twist or exposing a McGuffin I was able to redirect the story to challenge their expectations. It's a bit of a cheat, really, like placing microphones in a theatre to hear what the crowd is saying about a play so you re-write it between the acts. In this way I was able to keep a constant meter on whether I was straining credulity, whether I was falling into predictable clichés, or whether I was making people laugh and cry at the appropriate moments.¹¹

This gives participants in the secondary plot a level of influence on the text that can border on collective authorship, though ultimately it is still the creator of the blog who decides on the outcome. The importance of this is illustrated in Klaiber's account of a relation established between two contributors to a collaborative digital fiction on the writers' community site *One Million Monkeys*:¹²

Jenny Rock's gratefulness answers to Wagner's praise, who as the initiator of the story and one of the most active 'monkeys' [writers] on the platform has a celebrity status; her gratefulness thus establishes a hierarchical mentor-student relationship between Wagner and herself.¹³

⁷ Giant Girl Creative Team, *Giant Girl Rampages: Living Large With Melly Mills* [blog fiction], 2008 <<http://bigmellymills.blogspot.co.uk/>> [accessed 28-08-2009].

⁸ Giant Girl Creative Team, <<http://bigmellymills.blogspot.co.uk/2008/08/some-kind-of-code.html#comment-form>> [accessed 28-08-2009].

⁹ Elizabeth Baines, *What Would You Do?* [blog fiction], 04/09/2007-11/10/2007 <<http://manchesterblogstories.blogspot.com/>> [accessed 19-09-2007].

¹⁰ Chester BurtonCheesburger Brown [pseudonym], *Simon of Space* [blog fiction], 2005 <<http://www.simonofspace.blogspot.co.uk/>> [accessed 09-07-2015].

¹¹ Betsy Friedrich, *Fictional Blogs: How Digital Narratives are Changing the Way We Read and Write* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Coe College, 2007), p.99.

¹² *One Million Monkeys* [web site] <<http://www.1000000monkeys.com/>> [no longer accessible].

¹³ Klaiber, 'Wreading Together', p.133.

This inherent hierarchy is important to note. It is easy to assume that distribution of authorship will automatically democratise the writing process, but a blog's creator is usually the only one able to submit blog posts that are considered part of the storyworld and also has the power to moderate, edit or delete comments, giving them ultimate curatorial control. They are thus able to decide which contributors' ideas and comments will affect plot, which will become mere background, which will receive replies, which will be ignored entirely or even deleted. The uneven balance of power in this relation can make participation an intimidating prospect, more similar to sending work to a publisher for consideration than joining an improvisational game. As Paul Booth points out:

The possibility that one's unique contribution to a digital text may be ignored or removed highlights the insubstantiality of digital technology [...] Users may exalt the ability of digital technology to be updatable and uniquely interactive, but the possibility of the elimination of any one contribution may also be terrifying [...]¹⁴

It is perhaps for this reason that the power of the curator is often de-emphasised in blog fiction and left implicit. The ability to affect plot is important to many contributors, even if it is ultimately understood to be by the assent of the curator. The guidelines and participation agreement on the *Bad Influences* site were in part an attempt to be honest and explicit about the nature of this relation. I had hoped to save disappointment and reassure readers by clearly signposting the nature of the project and offering some guidance on content. However, such formal limitations may have worked to discourage potential participants by excluding them from the process of negotiating these boundaries. Some readers questioned the value of contributing to a text that would not be significantly affected, one feedback form saying: 'The notion that the entries are pre-written may affect my sense of feeling as if what I say will make a difference'.¹⁵ However, the most favourable review on *Web Fiction Guide* came from Fiona Gregory, the most active participant, which suggests that *Bad Influences* either rewarded this participative reading more than others supposed, or that for participation to be

¹⁴ Paul Booth, 'Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television', *Television & New Media*, 12.4 (July 2011), pp.370-388 (p.385).

¹⁵ Appendix 1, p.3.

rewarding a reader must already be engaged and invested in the story. Gregory was wholeheartedly a part of the project, describing the characters as ‘friends whom I will miss when this is over’ and encouraging others to ‘[...] get in before the end, be a part of it and COMMENT!’¹⁶

Curating Participation

While conversations on Facebook, *Under the Influence* and *Web Fiction Guide* reviews did prompt formal conversation on the story as a whole and on specific plot elements, I found it less intrusive to curate primary plot participation largely from within the text. I used the fictional bloggers’ responses and questions to Fiona (the character) in order to welcome contributions from Gregory (the participant) and encourage her to expand upon them, eliciting information that I could work into conversation with the other characters without any behind-the-scenes contrivances. I found that I had both a creative and a curatorial role in these interactions, balancing the collaborative improvisation of world- and character-building with the need to guide the conversation towards relevant subject matter that would interest readers not directly involved in that interaction. I was able to do this with few prompts beyond the primary plot, largely because Gregory was a perceptive and skilled contributor who read speculatively, picked up on plot points and responded to questions by developing an intriguing plot of her own in which Fiona found herself with an unofficially adopted daughter. This solicited questions and opinions from my characters and even allowed Ash to draw some emotional parallels with his own daughter’s growing independence.¹⁷ When Fiona revealed that she was using Elaine’s blog for entertaining and instructive bedtime stories, she tied the plot of her own story into the relational, feminist and utopian themes of the overall narrative, the ideas and perceptions that spread virally through blogs, influencing our attitudes, actions and the societies that we build. As a lone survivor, self-sufficient, reluctant to make alliances and distrustful of communities, Elaine occupies a role that has been almost exclusively the

¹⁶ Fiona Gregory, 'Subtle, clever, thoughtful, and surprising', *Web Fiction Guide* [internet forum;web site], 27th Feb 2013 <<http://webfictionguide.com/blogfic/bad-influences/review-by-fiona/>> [accessed 13-08-2008].

¹⁷ Emma Segar, 'Moving on Again', *Bad Influences* [blog fiction], 24 September 2013 <<https://nursinggrievances.wordpress.com/2013/09/24/moving-on-again/comment-page-1/#comment-257>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

preserve of male disaster fiction protagonists.¹⁸ This makes her blog the only means she has to influence or be influenced by other survivors. Through Fiona, she comes to realise that her blog is informing the next female generation of a community of survivors in Canada. I was delighted by this development (as was Elaine). It added context to her eventual decision to seek a community. It was not a capitulation to pressure, and certainly not a need for protection, but a recognition of the importance of community, and of her own importance. Through her blog – and through Fiona’s interactions with it – she had discovered the value of her skills to others, and gained a sense of self-worth, a reason to risk dying and to go on surviving. Fiona, meanwhile, had become the fifth Bad Influence, bringing another community into the narrative that was exerting influence on my characters.

Curating communities

My interactions with Gregory in the secondary plot were brief (as is generally the case on Facebook) and her speculations on approaching plot and character developments suggested that she was waiting to find out what I had in store, rather than attempting to alter it. I had been concerned that participants might try to introduce plot elements that would have a global impact, but Fiona’s story stayed local to Vancouver Island, and Gregory even e-mailed me to check whether I had any inside information on Canada to keep her comments consistent with the story.

While Gregory’s internal-ontological interaction was largely steered from within the primary plot, her participation was itself prompted by engagement beyond it. Before she posted to the character blogs, we had exchanged messages on the Facebook page, and she had sent a feedback form, reviewed *Bad Influences* on *Web Fiction Guide* and commented on a post in *Under the Influence*, in which I had expressed disappointment that more readers were not actively engaged in the

¹⁸ Examples can be found in: Richard Matheson, *I am Legend* (New York: Tor, 1995); Craig Harrison, *The Quiet Earth* (Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981); Harlan Ellison ‘A Boy and his Dog’ in *The Beast Who Shouted Love At The Heart Of The World* (New York: Avon, 1969); *Mad Max*. Dir. George Miller. Australia: MGM Studios. (1979) [Film] and its sequels; *Waterworld*. Dir. Kevin Reynolds. USA: Universal Pictures. (1995) [Film]; and arguably Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), in which the protagonist travels with his child, though he does not seek alliances with anybody else.

In Robert C. O’Brien, *Z for Zachariah* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Simon Pulse, 2007), Ann could be seen as a rare female example of this protagonist, though in contrast to most of the male examples she welcomes opportunities to find other survivors.

comments of the character blogs.¹⁹ These exchanges established a sense of familiarity and a common understanding of the text prior to Gregory's commitment to participate. As Ruth Page says, in 'Interactivity and Interaction':

The desire to meet the face needs of the other storytelling participants, such as building solidarity between storyteller and audience [...] are likely to be modified in relation to the extent to which the speaker and audience know each other (or at least perceive that they do). The meta-commentary thus becomes a dialogic space in which the interpersonal work of storytelling is extended and refined.²⁰

This suggests that participation in a primary plot, however confined to the text it may appear, is part of a broader relation not only to the text but to its creators and curators, and to all the other relations surrounding the text. It is not merely contributing some dialogue to a story or role-playing a character, but joining a community, albeit a small one in this instance. Gregory (the participant) waited until she had had direct contact with me (the creator) before Fiona (the character) entered the storyworld. Once she began, however, she quickly appeared to gain confidence and proceeded to comment on almost every subsequent post, engaging perceptively with each character's blog while building her own empathic and supportive character, asking questions that encouraged me to expand upon background and foreshadow impending plot. Her contributions to the story and prompts to the characters were invaluable for improving the story's veracity and exposition. My one regret for the project is that it did not have more participants bringing these elements out in each other's stories. There were some other participant characters at the beginning of the project, but aside from Fiona none became regular contributors.

In retrospect, my guidelines may have set the boundaries to the text so firmly that the community appeared closed. One feedback form from a reader who made no other contact suggested that they would have been willing to participate had they

¹⁹ Emma Segar, 'Distractions, Damn Distractions and WordPress Stats', *Under the Influence* [blog article], 12 April 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk/2013/04/12/distractions-damn-distractions-and-wordpress-stats/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

²⁰ Ruth Page, 'Interactivity and Interaction: Text and Talk in Online Communities', in *Intermediality and Storytelling* ed. by Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narratology: Contributions to Narrative Theory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp.208-231, p.218.

not been required to 'register to the story'.²¹ I had been concerned that if I did not screen comments and set limitations, the blogs may have been subject to trolling and spam, or that expansive interaction would take over the story. I should perhaps have been more concerned with encouraging participation than curtailing it.

Bad Influences is not the only blog fiction to have had difficulty recruiting regular participants. Friedrich notes that, 'Unlike, say, a political blog where you'll get a lot of instant feedback and links to and from your blog, fiction blogging seems to be quite an isolated and, at times, disheartening experience.'²² She quotes Jack Shepherd (one of the writers of *Peep This Diary*):

'We haven't had a lot of comments so far, and I'd very much like to see more. I think part of the problem may be that readers don't know how they're supposed to interact with the story, e.g., whether they should comment as themselves in the 21st century, or whether they can inject themselves into the story as characters.'²³

Friedrich concludes that 'This reluctance to participate, combined with the relative obscurity of blog fiction, has made establishing an active readership one of the most difficult challenges facing fictional bloggers.'²⁴ Though it would take a far larger and more quantitative study than mine to identify the reasons for this, my feedback suggests that formality and selectiveness are considered discouraging, while a sense of belonging in a community beyond the text can foster the confidence to contribute to a story, and the sense of investment that rewards that contribution.

Distributed authorship, copyright and ethics

My caution may have been excessive, and consequently I formalised the participation process to an extent that exacerbated the problem. However, my caution was not entirely unfounded, and was largely in response to the ethical

²¹ Appendix 1, p.8. This assertion was, in fact, a misinterpretation of the process – the agreement was not a registration but a confirmation that the participant had read the guidelines and understood the nature of the project. However, it may have been the presence of any formalised agreement that was off-putting.

²² Friedrich, p.19.

²³ Friedrich, pp.20-21

²⁴ Friedrich, p. 21

considerations that arise from my use of *Bad Influences* as academic research. Failing to tell participants what I expected of them – and what they could expect of me – would have risked exploiting their goodwill. In addition to the responsibility of dealing honestly with people whose creative work would benefit my research, there are copyright implications inherent in distributed authorship. The copyright for original writing remains by default with the writer,²⁵ whether the writing is on paper or a blog. This made it essential, legally as well as ethically, to ensure that anybody commenting on the blogs submitted the participation agreement, which stated that they had read and understood where and how their contributions would be used, and gave permission for this use. I regrettably had to reject the comments of one potential contributor who neglected to complete this form. Most online interactive fiction does not concern itself with these legalities, as there is little chance of a contributor attempting to sue for the use of their contributions in a non-commercial, non-academic creative endeavour. It is generally assumed that collaborative creative work online, being freely accessible, is contributed freely. However, as the curator of an academic project that would form part of a thesis, I could not afford to make this assumption.

This dilemma highlights the fact that distributed authorship is, in many ways, a return to a relational creative practice that used to be taken for granted, and has been eroded largely for the convenience of publishing printed works. As Simon Murray says in 'Remix My Lit: Towards an Open Access Literary Culture':

[...] literature has always been characterized by endless webs of influence and intertextual dialogue linking writers, crossing cultures and spanning the ages (Casanova, 2004). It is only those characteristic constructs of print culture – intellectual property, individual attribution, and private profit – that created the semblance of fixity.²⁶

If *Bad Influences* had not been a research project, the participation agreement would have been unnecessary, and the guidelines on commentary far less

²⁵ 'Fact sheet P-01: UK Copyright Law', *UK Copyright Service* [web site], 17th April 2015 <https://www.copyrightservice.co.uk/copyright/p01_uk_copyright_law> [accessed 09-07-2015].

²⁶ Simone Murray, 'Remix my Lit' Towards an Open Access Literary Culture', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media technologies*, 16.1 (February 2010), pp.23-38 (p.32).

prescriptive. Standard copyright would still have applied, protecting my work as well as that of participants, in the unlikely event such protections were needed. It was the status of *Bad Influences* as a research project, and of commentary as participation in that research to be reproduced as part of a thesis, that required informed consent and specific permissions from contributors.

Digital fiction – and especially forms like blog fiction, which invite the participation of strangers – tends to circumvent the restrictions placed on authorship over centuries of industrialised publishing, instead throwing readers, writers, artists, critics, reviewers, sharers and re-tweeters into relations that we are ill-equipped to define. This is one of the most intriguing aspects of participation in collaborative online fiction, and it is in large part the process of establishing these relations that attracts participants to such projects.²⁷ Those who accepted the guidelines and trusted their purpose accepted the relations that would determine the nature of *Bad Influences*. The participatory elements constituted neither a false interaction that would be rendered obsolete by a fixed plot, nor a freeform collaboration without narrative structure. The interaction did not change the outcome of the characters' stories, but it did change the reader's relation to them. The characters felt real to Gregory, as Fiona felt real to me. While the plot remained relatively fixed, the relations between the characters were very much open to the influence of participants.

Distribution of implied authorship

These relations allowed participants a role in negotiating the focalisation, or normative viewpoint, of *Bad Influences*, and thus influencing perspectives on the themes of disaster and utopia/dystopia, and the ideological dimension of the narrative. Here it is useful to look at the concepts of the implied author²⁸ and implied reader.²⁹

²⁷ Klaiber, 'Wreading Together', p.127

²⁸ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edn. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp.70-75.

²⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *The implied reader: patterns of communication in prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974) and Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 149-151.

The 'implied' in these roles is not simply a matter of persona or intention. Booth explains that, in the process of writing, the author constructs 'an implied version of "himself" that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works.'³⁰ This implied author is only partially within the real author's control, and will always bring a set of political and ideological presumptions to the text, whether the real author intends them and is aware of them or not.

However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner—and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values. Our reactions to his various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine our response to the work.³¹

The implied author is not the writer's public image or known political views but, as Rimmon-Kenan puts it, 'the governing consciousness of the work as a whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work [...] a construct inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text.'³² The implied reader is similarly not simply the reader of the demographic or political stance to whom the text is assumed to appeal, but the mindset or perspective a reader must view the text from in order to grasp its intent, even if that perspective is not one the real reader would identify with.³³ These constructs are concerned with the thematic dimension of a narrative, the political and ideological perspectives which, though they may be ambiguous or unobtrusive, are always present. When participants can directly interact with the writers and even the narrators who focalise these perspectives, they have the opportunity to influence these viewpoints and affect the implied conclusions of the narrative's themes. Klaiber explores this possibility in 'Multiple Implied Authors: How Many Can a Single Text Have?'

in collaborative online writing the formation of the implied author(s) is further complicated by the active involvement of all users [...] in the production and emergence of the open-ended narrative [...] Considering these dynamics, the implied author of collaborative online fiction is no

³⁰ Booth, pp.70-71.

³¹ Booth, p.71.

³² Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, New Accents (London: Routledge, 1983), pp.87.

³³ Chatman, p.148.

longer a 'mere' reading effect, but a matter for negotiation among users, i.e. readers, commentators, and authors.³⁴

Klaiber suggests that any narrative, regardless of the number of actual contributors, may have multiple implied authors where a single text seems to uphold multiple 'distinguishable set[s] of values'.³⁵ As explored in Chapter 3, the multiple blog format of *Bad Influences* works to provide a range of viewpoints and de-emphasise any one perspective or ideological focus, but nevertheless there are aspects of all four blogs that can be used to construct a single implied author. Unreliable narration plays an essential role in this. Most first person narrator-focalisers are not created as infallible moral compasses or mouthpieces of the author. A completely reliable narrator would leave nothing for the reader to discover or hope for, no tension between the ideal perception and the character's capacity to perceive it. Rimmon-Kenan defines one of the qualities of unreliability as:

'[...] the colouring of the narrator's account by a questionable value-scheme. A narrator's moral values are considered questionable if they do not tally with those of the implied author of the given work.'³⁶

While all the characters in *Bad Influences* are unreliable in some sense, Jack's outright dishonesty makes him a more identifiably unreliable narrator than the others, and his unreliability reflects the feminism of the implied author: if Jack's viewpoint is not to be trusted, and Jack's viewpoint is sexist, then the conclusion of his unreliability is a feminist one. Jack's character was, in part, a subversion of the contemporary trope of the slacker/nerd turned action hero, in which a young, unworldly, male social misfit responds to disaster or necessity with the unfeasibly swift acquisition of combat proficiency and relative emotional maturity, leading to his saving the day and being rewarded with the love of the woman who has been the object of his unhealthy obsession.³⁷ Instead, more plausibly, Jack remained

³⁴ Isabell Klaiber, 'Multiple Implied Authors: How Many Can a Single Text Have?', *Style*, 45.1 (Spring 2011), pp.138-152 (p.146).

³⁵ Klaiber, 'Multiple Implied Authors', p.138.

³⁶ Rimmon-Kenan, p.101.

³⁷ Contemporary examples of this protagonist can be seen in *Zombieland*. Dir. Ruben Fleischer. USA: Columbia Pictures. (2009) [Film]; *Kick Ass*. Dir. Matthew Vaughn. UK/USA: Marv Films. (2010) [Film]; *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*. Dir. Edgar Wright. USA, UK, Canada, Japan: Universal Pictures. (2010) [Film]; *Chuck*. Dir. McG. USA: College Hill Pictures Inc. NBC. (24-07-2007) [TV]; *Reaper*. USA, Canada: ABC Studios. (25-09-2007) [TV] and Mike Mullin, *Ashfall* (York, PA: Tanglewood Press, 25-09-2007).

inept, immature and fantasy-prone, struggling to accept the loss of the family he had been reliant upon while desperately maintaining the pretence of valiant survival. Instead, it is Mei who grows in confidence and competence to become a hero of her community, and instead of winning her as his prize, Jack has to come to terms with his irrelevance to her and move on. Mei, meanwhile, ultimately gains independence from all the expectations placed on her, including her own, by deciding to leave behind her blog, having understood that an external narration of her life would always be dangerously unreliable, manipulating her own worldview and causing her to manipulate others’.

In these ways, the four character blogs – though resisting the formation of a single, dominant character viewpoint – can work together to construct the political viewpoint of the implied author and implied reader. However, the commenting mechanism of blog fiction not only distributes authorship but can interrogate plot and character, offering new approaches to the construction of thematic and ideological perspectives, and perhaps multiplying the implied author after all. Klaiber says of collaborative Round Robin narratives:

it is the coherence and the 'implied promise' that is often broken at the transition from one author's contribution to the next, thus evoking multiple implied authors. [...] every author after the initial one is always a reader first, who participates in the inference of the 'implied promise' of the previous chapters and the coherence of the novel at large. The author-readers' individual inferences of the implied author of the previous chapters inform their own continuation of the story.³⁸

Although blog fiction is not a round robin, contributions to the comments sections can contain a tug-of-war for the dominant viewpoint, with effects similar to those Klaiber describes. Through internal distributed authorship, a participant may directly challenge the characters’ actions and opinions. Even the more subtle bias of cause and effect can be challenged. By sympathising with a character who is implied to be suffering the just consequences for their actions, a participant can dismiss the implicit poetic justice, refusing the position of the implied reader. While a reader of any narrative may do this, it is only in internal-ontological interaction

³⁸ Klaiber, 'Multiple Implied Authors', p.141.

that they can intervene in the text itself, where all subsequent readers will see, and argue for their own interpretation. For instance, a reader could have defended Jack against Elaine's accusations of selfishness, or told Mei that she should continue blogging and return to lead the Quarantine Movement. This would have been unlikely to change either character's actions, but enough dissent in the comments would have presented a challenge to the implications readers would ascribe to those actions. A significant shift in readers' relations to Jack and Mei could create a second implied author, countering the feminist politics of the original by defending Jack's intentions and bringing into doubt the validity of Mei's decisions.

There were many discussions of the rights and wrongs of the characters' actions on Facebook, though Fiona tended not to intervene in their disagreements in-character, saying early on that 'since I'm a newcomer on the blogs, I'm backing off on the personal stuff.'³⁹ Perhaps it was this distance that caused her to be more easily taken in by Jack's stories in the Primary than in the Secondary Plot, where she mentioned that 'Fiona is swallowing Jack's reports hook line and sinker - or too polite to say otherwise. She's going to feel silly if it turns out to be bogus [...]'⁴⁰ Her unwillingness to intervene may be partly a result of the tendency noted earlier for distributed authorship to make hierarchies of contributors, with the creator of the project implicitly at the top and others reluctant to contradict them. It would have been interesting to see whether a greater number of primary plot participants would have given each other the confidence to challenge the characters directly, contributing their own voices to the thematic conclusions of the text.

Of course, as well as challenging the text, characters and participants can offer each other support and reassurance that they have made the *right* choices. Thematic discussion can be very direct without losing veracity, since ideological and political conflicts are a regular feature of comment threads on real blogs. I prompted these conversations in *Bad Influences* through the characters' hopes and fears for their emerging societies, analysing what had gone wrong and

³⁹ 'Jack is making it up to Mei', *Facebook: Bad Influences* [facebook post], 16 May 2013 <<http://www.facebook.com/BadInfluencesBlogfic/posts/651339998213992>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

⁴⁰ 'Taking Responsibility', *Facebook: Bad Influences* [facebook post], 15 August 2013 <<http://www.facebook.com/BadInfluencesBlogfic/posts/700009096680415>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

speculating on the potential dangers or triumphs they could face in future, and Fiona joined in. Memes and quizzes on disaster and utopia, which could be completed and shared by readers as well as characters, were mechanisms for spreading that discussion beyond the spaces of the text. The quiz *What Utopia Are You Building?*⁴¹ prompted discussion of utopias in general on the *Bad Influences* Facebook page⁴² and was used on at least one other blog fiction.⁴³ The proliferation of these themes via social media is one of the more concrete examples of relational poetics, the ability of the text to act as a catalyst in forming relations between its readers and their communities that can spread beyond the text itself.

Distributed Authorship and Utopianism

Utopian and dystopian themes are central to all disaster fiction, but particularly relevant to blog fiction's interactivity in their emphasis on the purpose and nature of a community, and on the way such communities are built, maintained or destroyed by the actions and influences of their residents. Murray spoke of emerging gaming and role-playing cultures focused largely on either violence or community, predicting that:

The Internet is therefore likely to serve as a global stage for conflicts between these two groups, turning the struggle between the blasters and the builders into a kind of worldwide morality play.⁴⁴

This has come to pass, and not merely in gaming communities. Social media has made the internet into an ever-growing global conversation that frequently breaks into both vicious fighting and inspiring co-operation. No matter the topic of the discussion, underlying it is the eternal question of whether it will bring us together or drive us apart. *Bad Influences* provides a relatively safe arena and then stirs this conflict by asking participants to explore whether their communities would, under the circumstances of the story, cohere or collapse, and to speculate upon

⁴¹ Emma Segar, 'Which Utopia are you Building?', *Bad Influences* [web page], 4 June 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk/take-part/which-utopia-are-you-building/>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

⁴² 'Which Utopia are you building?', *Facebook: Bad Influences* [facebook post], 4 June 2013 <<http://www.facebook.com/BadInfluencesBlogfic/posts/661347453879913>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

⁴³ Yasmin Radine, 'What? This island isn't Communist, you -%,\$s.', *Yasmin Forty-Seven* [blog fiction], April 4 2014 <<http://www.yasminfortyseven.tk/2014/04/what-this-island-isnt-communist-you-s.html>> [accessed 29-06-2015].

⁴⁴ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p.284.

the ensuing societies that would emerge. This offers a new approach to political discourse within fiction and the potential for interesting developments in utopian writing, long out of favour in its traditional form for its tendency to didacticism. In *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*, Chris Ferns says of the dialogue within Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Morris' *News from Nowhere*:

Serving a mainly didactic intent, its effect is to foreclose dialogue, rather than encourage it; confronted by such devices, the reader is likelier to feel that the debate has been rigged than that his or her active participation is invited. Rooted in such conventions, utopian narrative is often in fact anti-dialogic, rather than dialectical, enacting the suppression and marginalization of other voices, rather than allowing them free and creative interaction.⁴⁵

The commentary in interactive blog fiction could allow the narrators' assertions to be interrogated directly by the readers themselves, transforming utopian dialogue into a genuine conversation – or, indeed, a genuine argument. Whether through friendly questioning, passive aggression or outright antipathy, characters and participants battle for the prevailing viewpoint in comments sections. It is an arena in which perceptions of the implied author and implied reader are open to direct and deliberate influence from their real counterparts.

As we have seen, though, it is likely that only a small proportion of readers will feel confident to participate in this way. A developing conversational form in both fiction and reality, the protocols of blog commentary remain a volatile mixture of soapbox and roundtable, rife with mutual misunderstanding and cognitive dissonance, but also groundbreaking in their potential to transform and synthesise opinions, to introduce and spread new ideas virally. The uninterruptibility of the blog comment prompts a tendency to preach, to over-explain and to escalate conflict rather than concede the last word. Blog comments are somewhat like graffiti, in that they are left as semi-anonymous calling cards in a space that is perceived and treated as public while technically owned and controlled, where there can be replies that the writer may or may not return to see, and may or may not respond to if they do, and

⁴⁵ Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia : Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p.24.

where a significant number of responses may result in a territorial dispute. In blog commentary, expressing a dissenting viewpoint where there is a pre-existing consensus can be interpreted as trolling, and can provoke aggressive responses. Fictional blogs offer some shielding from this, in that it is initially the fictional character who is most likely to come under fire, and posting through a metaleptic counterpart gives the real reader some distance from the conversation. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for people to identify with their metaleptic counterparts, and there is potential for these exchanges to become extremely unpleasant. Any blog fiction encouraging discursive commentary on contentious issues should have some safeguards in place for the responsible curation of conflict, such as posting guidelines, comment moderation or an arrangement to close comment threads after a set period of time.

In this sense, a blog fiction creator is not just the writer of a narrative but the curator of a conversation, providing a space to explore the ideas within the story and promote meaningful dialogue on issues with a potential impact beyond the story, in the real lives of readers. This aspect, more than any other, embodies the relational nature of the poetics of blog fiction.

Chapter 5

Continuing experiments in relational fiction

Blog fiction's reliance on the human relations prompted or changed by encounters with the text make it a useful example of what Aukje van Rooden refers to when describing Relational Poetics. Van Rooden does not apply this concept specifically to digital fiction, but offers it as a means of viewing all literary texts not merely as *products* of their social, cultural and historical context but as themselves human relations to that context.¹ The problem with applying this as a general analysis of literature is that, unlike the performance and installation art on which Nicholas Bourriaud bases his idea of *Relational Aesthetics*, the written word is, as van Rooden points out, 'generally produced, received and enjoyed in isolation.'² While Bourriaud allows that 'art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue'³ the notion of relational aesthetics is not simply that all art describes a relation to its context, but that relational art relies upon the relations that it prompts and explores, rather than on the artefact itself, for its meaning: 'an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space[...]'.⁴ To explain what this means for relational poetics, it is useful to examine one of the examples that Bourriaud gives of a relational artwork:

A metal gondola encloses a gas ring that is lit, keeping a large bowl of water on the boil. Camping gear is scattered around the gondola in no particular order. Stacked against the wall are cardboard boxes, most of them open, containing dehydrated Chinese soups which visitors are free to add to the boiling water and eat.⁵

This piece by Rirkrit Tiravanija explores how the provision, preparation and consumption of food can transform the social relations within a gallery space. While there may be many examples of more traditional painting, sculpture or

¹ Aukje van Rooden, 'Relational Poetics: Towards A Reevaluation of The Literary Within Cultural Studies' in *Current Issues in European Cultural Studies* held by Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS) at Norrköping (15 June 2011), pp.453-458
<<http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/062/046/ecp11062046.pdf>> [19-01-2013].

² van Rooden,, (p.457).

³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2002), p.15.

⁴ Bourriaud, p.14.

⁵ Bourriaud, p.25.

performance on these themes, the aesthetic here relies on the way the viewer is not simply prompted to decode or consider them but is actively drawn to participate in their exploration. Even the viewer who walks by the exhibit without sitting in the gondola or eating any soup has – by their choice of inaction – actively participated, because their reasons for that choice and the ways in which they enact it (walking briskly past, choosing not to look, looking longingly but not feeling able to participate, even being uninterested and ignoring the entire exhibit), in themselves constitute interactions with the work and its themes. The piece's relational aesthetics are not achieved simply by virtue of its exploration of relational themes, but by its formal embodiment of them. As Bourriaud says: 'Relational aesthetics does not represent a theory of art [...] but a theory of form.'⁶

Van Rooden's analysis of literary text as contextual relation rather than mere *product* of context may be a useful application of Bourriaud to literary and cultural studies, but in applying her term 'Relational Poetics' to distributed narratives I would like to take it further by reintroducing Bourriaud's original meaning, that of a formal embodiment of the relational. Just as the gondola, fire and soups in Tiravanija's piece are not, in themselves, the artwork, the blog posts in *Bad Influences* are not, in themselves, the narrative but a catalyst for its actualisation. The relations that the reader or participant enters into when experiencing *Bad Influences* constitute an essential aspect of the narrative. Though the text is narrative in nature and contains the four characters' stories, merely reading the words without an active relation to the text will not actualise a relational story. The e-book on the CD that accompanies this analysis is not a blog fiction, any more than a video of a live performance is the performance, or a sourcebook for a tabletop roleplaying game is the game. To experience the relational poetics of *Bad Influences*, it must be read online, because the distribution of the narrative and the means of accessing it are essential components of its textuality.

Blog fiction is far from the only relational or distributed form of digital narrative, but blog fiction's particular strength is the ability to combine all three forms of distributed narrative. Blogs are serialised, so blog fiction is distributed in time: potentially in real-time, but always in the time between blog posts. Blogs are hyperlinked, so blog fiction is distributed in space: sometimes over several blogs

⁶ Bourriaud, p.19.

or other websites, but always over the separate posts and the navigational potential they present (the archive is reduced solely to this distribution). Blogs are interactive, so blog fiction is distributed in authorship: sometimes through the potential for direct participation and collaboration in the comments, but always through the potential to influence the narrative during its development. In this way blog fiction can fully embody the potential of relational poetics.

In spite of this, as Chapter 1 acknowledges, blog fiction never did become a widespread or widely recognised form. Blog fiction listings, commentary and the use of the term 'blog fiction' itself have all diminished significantly in the last five years. One possible explanation for this is that the personal, diary-style blog, while still common, is no longer a primary hub for online social interaction. Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr are now the major social media platforms, while blogs have taken on a more formal, journalistic role, providing the content to be shared and discussed within these more adaptable social networks. This is reflected in a general shift of focus to these newer platforms for innovative interactive fiction. There is currently a prestigious annual Twitter Fiction festival,⁷ while there have been no new Booker Prize⁸ awards since 2007.

While there are relatively few current blog fictions online, a search for 'blog' in the 'fiction' category at Amazon reveals many novels written wholly or partly as blogs (such as Mira Grant's *Feed*, Zoe Sugg's *Girl Online*, Ben Davis' *The Private Blog of Joe Cowley*.) This begs the question of why, given the clear appeal of the blog as a contemporary epistolary form, writers are not choosing to post these narratives online in real blogs. Lisa Blower's recent creative writing thesis *The Misrepresentation of Me*, uses this form of epistolary blog within a novel. She says in her analysis, *Telling Blogs*, that the novel 'attempts to capture what bloggers do when online',⁹ yet there were aspects of the blog form that she felt would be obstructive to her story, and wished to avoid (she mentions short post length, blog-rolls, links, comments and the suggestion that her protagonist is seeking

⁷ #TwitterFiction Festival [web site] <<http://twitterfictionfestival.com/>> [accessed 22-01-2015].

⁸ *The Booker Prize* [web site] <<http://www.bookerprize.com/>> [accessed 31-12-2008]. Currently available in archive at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20080509070504/http://www.lulubookerprize.com/>> [accessed 21-08-2015]

⁹ Lisa Blower, *Telling Blogs: A Creative and Critical Overview of the Female Autobiographical Experience* (Bangor: University of Bangor, 2010), p.9.

community or feedback from strangers).¹⁰ There were other elements, however, that she was keen to convey:

The blog is a narrative vehicle that shows [...] a life being tracked, updated, and lived, with bloggers often committing thoughts to text as they happen. Bloggers also tend to compartmentalise past from present, archive memories, and express the self as a *relational consciousness* [my emphasis]; in terms of their offline relationships, the friendships they foster online, and in context of other bloggers who blog in similar styles on similar subjects.¹¹

While an epistolary novel lacks the formal mechanisms to explore this relational consciousness in relational ways, the concept of relationality as a theme nevertheless has a clear appeal to Blower. The fact that novel writers are attempting to emulate this feature of blogging is testament to the effect that blogs and social media have had on our narrative consciousness, even if few are experimenting with the blog as medium, or with a truly relational poetics. That the novel may turn out a more successful medium for epistolary blogs than the blog itself would have surprised those who, a decade ago, feared the imminent obsolescence of the printed word, but not those who are active writers and readers in both printed and digital literary realms. As R. Lyle Skains explains in *The Shifting Author-Reader Dynamic*:

The new digital technologies, granting storytellers the ability to combine text with audio-visual, ludic, and hypertext elements, are not a death toll for the novel. Rather, like film, they present new frontiers for storytelling.¹²

The reverse also applies. Just as digital writing has not meant the death of the novel, these epistolary blog novels do not signify the end of blog fiction, but the reciprocal influence between old and new media. It is possible that the presence of epistolary blogs in print, especially if it achieves any success, will inspire further experiments in blog fiction, feeding into the narrative conventions of the form.

¹⁰ Blower, p.32.

¹¹ Blower, pp.31-32.

¹²R. Lyle Skains, 'The Shifting Author-Reader Dynamic', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 16.1 (February 2010), pp.95-111 (p.97).

Even so, it seems audiences will not be quick to follow this form of epistolary back to its roots on the internet, or to work out what to do with it when they find it there. Relational poetics is not just a new mode of writing but a new mode of reading: not quite ludic enough for gamers, but still presenting far too many new and confusing options and interactions for conventional readers to be able to make an easy or mass transition. It will take time and experimentation to establish its formal properties to the extent that it can be approached by most readers without confusion, just as the novel took time to establish such user-friendly conventions as chapters, page numbers and a standardised layout for dialogue.¹³ The relational readership will most likely come of age alongside the form itself, as Skains suggests:

Readers accustomed to unexpected options and increased reader-participation [...] are likely to become far more common as the 'digital' generation approaches adulthood, a generation whose previous experiences and narrative conventions include online gaming and hypertext environments.¹⁴

However, as it stands, many readers are resistant to these features. For some who discovered the story through *Web Fiction Guide*, *Bad Influences* suffered for being neither freely interactive enough for the role-play communities that its live incarnation resembled,¹⁵ nor straightforward enough for a pre-written, serialised narrative. This community was used to reading and writing serialised narratives online, including blog fiction, but generally expected that each narrative would be contained within a single blog or web site. The spatial distribution of *Bad Influences* was problematic for one reader, who suggested:

As a collection of blogs, it fails as blogfic in the early chapters because the blogs don't have much life to them for any character but Mei. As a [single] narrative, it succeeds better because then all the characters are

¹³ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p.28.

¹⁴ Skains, (pp.105-106).

¹⁵ SgL, 'Credible science, personality development, and just like a real pandemic', *Web Fiction Guide* [internet forum;web site], 14th Feb 2013 <<http://webfictionguide.com/listings/bad-influences/review-by-sgl/>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

telling one story. [...] As a narrative it might be stronger, but that's my objection to blog fiction as a genre and format—so it should have just been a narrative.¹⁶

Some responses to *Bad Influences* suggested I was over-exploiting blog features and not putting enough expositional action into the story itself,¹⁷ and it is true that at the start I was less focused on character exposition through action than on using blog features narratively, including blogger profiles, comments, memes, quizzes, design themes, banner artwork and user avatars – all the features that Blower rejected as incompatible with her more traditional storytelling mode, perhaps with good reason. However, I wanted to discover what the medium had to offer aesthetically that the traditional novel could not, even at the risk of overloading the story with meta-features that not all readers would appreciate. The reviewers at *Epiguide* felt that they could not suspend their disbelief because they were 'aware that it was an experiment.'¹⁸ Janet Murray points out that this formal self-consciousness is not unusual in developing or incunabular narrative forms:

Cervantes has Don Quixote and Sancho Panza discuss the reception of the first part and quarrel with the representation of some of their adventures. [...] In] Laurence Sterne[']s[...] *Tristram Shandy* [...] the narrator inserts blank pages, numbers chapters as if they had been rearranged, claims to have torn out certain pages, and sends us back to reread certain chapters. In short, he does everything he can to remind us of the physical form of the book we are reading.¹⁹

While my use of the blog's formal characteristics was not to such subversive or comedic effect, my intention was very deliberately to draw attention to the presence of the blogs, to emphasise the characteristics of the medium and attempt to establish conventions for its narrative use, and it is only to be expected that this met with mixed responses.

¹⁶ G.S. Williams, 'Showing its Façade', *Web Fiction Guide* [internet forum;web site], 15th Feb 2013 <<http://webfictionguide.com/listings/bad-influences/review-by-gswilliams/>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

¹⁷ Emma Segar, 'Reflections on time', *Under the Influence* [blog article], 11 February 2013 <<http://badinfluences.org.uk/2013/02/11/reflections-on-time/comment-page-1/#comment-64>> [accessed 11-05-2015].

¹⁸ Kira Lerner, 'Epicast #12 June, Recaps & News', *EpiCast webserial news, recaps & chat* [podcast], 13 June 2013 <<http://epiguide.podbean.com/2013/06/>>, (00:15:40) [accessed 23-08-2015].

¹⁹ Murray, pp.103-104.

Perhaps more important than these formal differences, there are stylistic conventions of prose fiction that blog fiction cannot quite replicate, and for which it has not yet established satisfactory alternatives. The first person voice of blog fiction is neither the unfiltered inner voice of interior monologue nor the dramatic monologue that speaks confidentially to an implied listener, but the self-conscious voice of a public speaker who knows that there is an audience, but cannot see precisely who it consists of, or know for sure whether they will applaud or jeer. There are elements of defensiveness, apology and provocation in this voice. The blogger sometimes narrates their life as if they occupy a confessional or a courtroom dock, sometimes a podium or soapbox. This denies blog fiction writers some of the conventions of prose monologue that work to make it unobtrusive and allow readers their familiar immersion in the text. Everything I wished to tell the reader about the characters had to be filtered not only through the character's voice but their awareness of that voice's presence on public display. Reported interactions were cumbersome, since excessive quoted dialogue implies an unlikely feat of memory, and too much visual description a strangely specific focus on detail. Each of the bloggers in *Bad Influences* uses dialogue in their narration, though I tried to keep this to a minimum and used reported speech where possible (or in Elaine's case, implied that she could refer to recordings.) Even so, it was difficult to make the dialogue sit well within a blog post. The description of telling expressions, mannerisms and other visual cues to describe characters' emotional responses loses its usual subtlety and instead suggests an affectation or literary pretension in the blogger. These were techniques I found myself struggling to adapt in ways that maintained both the veracity of the blogs as blogs and the readability of the story as prose fiction. One technique I found to be successful was the use of short snatches of conversation, with a little characteristic embellishment from the blogger. This injected a change of voice, some visual information and some immediacy into posts that otherwise suffered from too much reported action. An emphasis on introspection and a tendency to telling rather than showing (through lack of dialogue or physical descriptive detail) are inherent features of the blog form that can make long posts tiresome to read. It remains to be seen whether blog fiction will develop further conventions to combat these tendencies or simply fade away in the wake of new, shorter-form social media, such as Twitter.

Twitter fiction is not always epistolary, and the 140-character limit has prompted a form of flash fiction known as the 'Twister': a complete story within a single Tweet.²⁰ As with blog fiction, it is the serialised, epistolary Twitter fiction that is of interest as a relational form. However, the presence of Twisters on a high-traffic social media platform means that they are not entirely stand-alone stories but subject to an ever-changing relational context. As Bronwen Thomas notes in '140 Characters in Search of a Story':

we need to understand the affordances of Twitter and the kind of relationship that exists between users. [...] It is also vital to remember that individual tweets appear in a timeline alongside tweets from all sorts of different sources, requiring constant adjustments from users in terms of the kind of response appropriate to the content.²¹

Twitter shares, if not magnifies, the tendency of the blog to render the first person voice more self-conscious than is the case in traditional novels, even epistolary ones. However, its extreme short-form nature overcomes the problem of extensive telling, or rather, forces each lexia to be too concise for the tone to become wearing, each Tweet rarely recounting more than one action. The accelerated immediacy noted in Chapter 2 is also a factor in overcoming this tendency, because the action is more often implied to be ongoing as the protagonist Tweets, not an account of the previous day. This, though, can create other stylistic issues if the whole story is read as a stream, the overall effect becoming a monotone, each event not following from the next but hanging in the air as an isolated observation, with little opportunity to build tension or emotion from one Tweet to the next. In *Black Box*, Jennifer Egan does not so much overcome this tendency as make it a stylistic feature. The protagonist reports events she is experiencing as if they were recommendations in a training manual for hypothetical scenarios, accentuating her dissociation from her situation. The effect is both subtly chilling and wryly humorous, an exemplary instance of a narrative tailored to its form. This was a deliberate decision on Egan's part, as she explains:

²⁰ Bronwen Thomas, '140 Characters in Search of a Story: Twitterfiction as an Emerging Narrative Form', in *Analyzing Digital Fiction* ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad, Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Stylistics (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp.94-108, p.97.

²¹ Thomas, '140 Characters in Search of a Story', p.98.

I love the thought of trying to use it [Twitter] as a delivery system for fiction, and I'm interested in the way that some nineteenth-century fiction was constructed around its serialization. So, the question was: what kind of story would need to be told in these very short bursts? [...] I wanted to try to write a spy story set in the future, and I was interested in telling a story in the form of a list. And, out of all that, I began to have a sense of a woman's voice speaking in these short dispatches about her spying experience. As soon as I began hearing that voice, it was clear that this would be the piece that would be, in some way, disseminated over Twitter.²²

Serialized Twitter fiction also has the potential for internal-ontological interaction on a mass scale, and challenges to the authorship and even curatorship of the creator, even more so than blog fiction. While comments on a blog are confined to the blog post itself, a space ultimately controlled by its creator, Twitter users can employ the fiction's hashtag or the fictional account's handle to ensure that their responses will appear under any search that aggregates the story, and the creator can do nothing to eliminate any given contribution. When I curated the participatory Twitter fiction *Among Us*,²³ I tweeted a series of fictional news stories, over 24 hours, about the revelation of a global infiltration by human-seeming aliens with the ability to teleport. The news stories communicated information, rather than action. The idea was for participants, using their own or especially created Twitter accounts, to provide the action through their responses to these stories over the course of the day. These, along with the news stories, would be brought together by the shared use of the hashtag #au_tf. A second hashtag, #au_twitfic, was used for out-of-character discussion of the story. I also used the private messaging feature of Twitter to answer questions and give technical support for participants unfamiliar with the use of hashtags. As with *Bad Influences*, I created a web site explaining the project,²⁴ inviting participation and giving guidelines and provisos on character creation, the only real limitations being to try not to imply information that contradicted mine, and that participants could not take on the character of an

²² Deborah Treisman, 'This Week in Fiction: Jennifer Egan', *The New Yorker* [web site], 25 May 2012 <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-jennifer-egan>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

²³ Emma Segar, *Among Us: A collaborative twitter fiction* [website], 15th-16th March, 2014 <<http://amongustwiffic.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 08-06-2014].

²⁴ Segar, <<http://amongustwiffic.wordpress.com/>>

alien, since their nature was to remain a mystery until the conclusion of the story. Since all Tweets using the #au_tf hashtag appeared in the story stream regardless of my curation, this was the only way I could attempt to ensure that nothing the participants tweeted would entirely invalidate my planned conclusion. *Among Us* was a far more open and malleable story than *Bad Influences*, and while participants' contributions were beyond my control, the story was more easily adapted to them. When a new participant, late to the story, took on the role of an alien by mistake, a reminder to all on the #au_twitfic hashtag that: 'Your character can't actually *be* a Wanderer. But you can believe or pretend you're one!'²⁵ was happily enough to save the situation.

Facebook has also been used as a platform for fiction, but due to the 'real name policy'²⁶ these have often either been created elsewhere to visually resemble Facebook timelines (*austenbook*)²⁷ or enacted between accounts created for the purpose by a single user, then captured and shared as an image before the accounts themselves were made unavailable (*Facebook King Lear*).²⁸ Since the introduction of Facebook Pages (an alternative to personal accounts that can be used for promotional purposes) a huge number of fan-created and official Facebook profiles have emerged for fictional and historical characters, from *Barbie* to a time-travelling *Steampunk Emma Goldman* to the extremely popular *God*,²⁹ and while some of these interact with each other on occasion, they are rarely used narratively. While there have been examples of longer-form, original fiction on Facebook, these have not found long-term success. Bryan Alexander, in *The New Digital Storytelling*, mentions *My Darklyng*, a novel-length work which was distributed over 'thirty-three Web pages, allied to one character's Facebook

²⁵ Emma Segar, @AU_twitfic [twitter], 16 March 2014, 2:12pm
<https://twitter.com/AU_twitfic/status/445201013692461056> [accessed 23-08-2015].

²⁶ 'What names are allowed on Facebook?', *Facebook* [web page]
<<https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

²⁷ DeeDee [pseudonym], 'austenbook', *muchado.net* [web site], 2008 <<http://www.muchado.net/austenbook/>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

²⁸ Hannah Wood, 'Facebook King Lear', *HannahWood* [web site], 20 October 2011
<<http://www.hannah-wood.com/portfolio/detail/facebook-king-lear>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

²⁹ 'Barbie', *Facebook* [facebook page] <<https://www.facebook.com/officialbarbieuk>> [accessed 23-08-2015]; 'Steampunk Emma Goldman', *Facebook* [facebook page]
<<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Steampunk-Emma-Goldman/220752057953650>> [accessed 23-08-2015]; 'God', *Facebook* [facebook page] <<https://www.facebook.com/TheGoodLordAbove>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

profile',³⁰ while in 2013 Steve Lowtwait began *Hawk Funn*, a real-time 'illustrated social fiction' story to be told through Facebook and Twitter.³¹ *Hawk Funn* did not reach its funding goal, and neither story's Facebook elements remain. The most successful fictions to use Facebook have been those that exist primarily on other social media. Lance Dann's *The Flickerman* uses a Flickr account, a blog, two Facebook accounts and a layer on Google Maps for a story that he reworks as text, audio and video.³² These multi-platform transmedia fictions have overwhelming possibilities for ontological and exploratory interaction, and their popularity is growing as they become integrated more accessibly into our everyday use of social media and technology. One of the most significant examples is the Alternate Reality Game (ARG) *Ingress*.³³ Primarily an app-based game using a Google Maps engine, its narrative element expands over an enormous number of interactive Google+, Twitter and Facebook accounts, as well as websites, videos and documents containing elements of puzzles whose solutions yield gameplay rewards. Few of its 7 million players³⁴ worldwide could possibly discover and follow every strand of the narrative, but all are involved in its formation through their gameplay, which includes regular live events in which thousands of players from the game's two factions compete for control of geographical areas, collecting virtual objects whose narrative significance will be determined by the outcome. Players in a local area can make contact through the game and often have regular meetings to plan tactics and gain more ground for their faction. Occasionally – locally or nationally, and in opposition to the game's aims – players from opposing factions collaborate in producing massive and complex 'field art' on the game map,³⁵ an example of the potential of relational narrative to become more than the creators intended, through the creativity of participants.

³⁰ Bryan Alexander, *The New Digital Storytelling: Creating Narratives with New Media* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011), p.74.

³¹ Steve Lowtwait, 'Hawk Funn : revolutionary social media entertainment.', *Kickstarter* [web site], 19 August 2013 <<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/campsteve/hawk-funn-revolutionary-social-media-storytelling>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

³² Lance Dann, *The Flickerman* [web site], 2009-2012 <<http://www.theflickerman.com/>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

³³ *Ingress* [web site] <<https://www.ingress.com/>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

³⁴ Dean Takahashi, 'Google's mobile game Ingress enables 7M players to create user-generated missions', *Venture Beat* [web site], 25 September 2014 <<http://venturebeat.com/2014/09/25/googles-mobile-game-ingress-enables-7m-players-to-create-user-generated-missions/>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

³⁵ 'Screenshot', *Merry Ingress: un progetto interfazione - A cross faction project* [web site], December 2014 <<https://merryingress.wordpress.com/portfolio/screenshot/>> [accessed 23-08-2015].

Scott Rettberg applied this principle in *All Together Now*, when he imagined the future of digital fiction:

One can imagine a writing community with the robustness of Wikipedia, dedicated to a collective vision of writing a novel that is in effect many novels with interchangeable parts [...] Such a project would be performance, game, and literature. What we do today with our collective references and photographs we could soon do, together, in collective narrative. We may not be there yet, but it is well within our reach.³⁶

This is similar to an idea Simone Murray spoke of in 'Remix My Lit' (published before the new social media sites had eclipsed blogging), the potential of the internet to create digital and socially-networked equivalents of the Victorian scrapbook, whose community input 'would not, at the end of the experiment, simply be collapsed back into the familiar print culture tropes of text as publisher-sealed artefact and Author-as-God figure.'³⁷

Blog fiction can certainly be seen as the beginning of this trend. More malleable social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, now seem the more likely platforms for its continuation, while curatory apps and sites such as Storify provide the means to combine, present and access their contents in ways that retain the unique features of each platform, creating endless potential for intermedia fictional forms online.

³⁶ Scott Rettberg, 'All Together Now: Hypertext, Collective Narratives, and Online Collective Knowledge Communities', in *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age* ed. by Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp.187-204, p.202.

³⁷ Simone Murray, 'Remix my Lit' Towards an Open Access Literary Culture', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media technologies*, 16.1 (February 2010), pp.23-38 (p.28).

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have discussed the relational elements of *Bad Influences*, and described blog fiction as a relational form. In this context, a relational narrative means more than simply a story about people relating to one another, or a form that is particularly apt for exploring these themes. It means that relations formed by, through and around the text are essential to its interpretation, to the extent that these relations become a part of the text. In *Bad Influences*, the interaction between participants' personae and the story's characters, though a fictional relation, is a very real part of the relations formed between creator and participant, writer and reader. The influence these relations had on the curation and development of the project worked to blur the distinction between these roles. The fact that the characters' stories were posted in real-time created a relation between the narrative time and readers' lived experience of passing time. The ability to navigate the completed text gives readers of the archive an unusual level of structural control, and this shapes their relation to its themes, ideas and characters. All of these relations influence the ways in which readers and writers interpret and apply the story's themes and ideals.

Distributed narratives, as Walker Rettberg says, 'break down the aesthetics of unity we have followed for millennia [...] by collapsing the unity of form as well as that of content and concept.'¹ When we are faced with distributed forms of narrative in which no single object or point of focus (e.g. a book, film, regularly scheduled TV series or pre-scheduled live event) can be described as 'the text', we need to enter into a different kind of process in order to decode and understand them. While all narrative is experienced as a complex process of events, distributed narrative relies on the process of accessing it, so that the relations we enter into during that process become a part of the process, and so a part of the narrative. This is what Walker Rettberg describes when she suggests that distributed narratives '[...] point to a new kind of unity: a unity where the time and space of the narrative are in sync with the time and space of the reader.'²

¹ Jill Walker, 'Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks' in *IR 5.0* held by Association of Internet Researchers at Brighton (21 September 2004) <<http://jilltxt.net/txt/Walker-AoIR-3500words.pdf>> [03-06-2015], (p.11).

² Walker, 'Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks', (p.11).

Blog fiction was the first fully developed, real-time epistolary narrative form to grow out of the internet, and while attention shifted from it before a fraction of its potential had been uncovered, it did everything with networked narrative that Janet Murray pointed out the computer had the potential for:

The computer presents us with the spatial mosaic of the newspaper page, the temporal mosaic of film, and the participatory mosaic of TV remote control. But even while it combines the confusing multiplicity of these mosaic media, the computer offers us new ways of mastering fragmentation.³

Distributed narratives are particularly suited to themes of fragmentation and the search for a new unity. They embody these themes through a relational poetics that requires readers to piece together textual elements in order to unify the narrative, in the process forming new relations to the text, to its creators and to one another.

As each blog in *Bad Influences* draws close to its conclusion, the characters adjust their relations to one another, either deciding to abandon their blogs in favour of their new lives or making it clear that their priorities, and their relations to their old friends, are changing. While this brings about a separation of the narrative strands, the overall narrative is unified as all four characters go through a similar process, with similar realisations. The community surrounding the narrative is also drawn together by the knowledge of its imminent obsolescence, and whether the interactions this prompts result in unity (perhaps lasting friendships) or re-fragmentation (to move on to new projects) becomes a context that not only influences interpretation of the narrative but shapes and characterises the narrative itself, both in terms of those participants' perceptions of *Bad Influences* and their application of those relations to their broader context. In this way, the temporal, spatial and authorial relations between readers, characters and participants in *Bad Influences* extends the reader's agency into the themes of the story as they relate to the participants' and readers' own stories, the narratives of their lives. Through these relations, within the blogs and beyond them, *Bad Influences* became more than a story *about* disaster, social isolation, community

³ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*, p.156.

and utopian aspirations; it became a prompt for the participants' personal exploration of these themes, in other blog fictions, in social media, in the inspiration of new projects and even in personal conversations.

My aim in writing *Bad Influences* as a research project was to experiment with the underused formal features available to blog fiction, and to use the processes of writing, posting and engaging with readers to investigate the ways in which these features and processes shaped the form's poetics. While the number of readers who engaged ontologically with the project was lower than expected, the intensity and enthusiasm of those interactions, and their significance to the story, were pronounced enough to confirm the relational nature of the form's poetics. While I cannot know the full extent to which external and exploratory interactions affected the experience of readers who did not communicate with me directly, there is no doubt that the nature of a blog fiction archive is intrinsically relational in the interpretative elements of narrative that are determined – or at least strongly influenced – by the order in which they are read.

There is still much experimentation and development that remains for blog fiction, and the next step may lie in explorations of its own relations to other narrative forms, established and emerging. My own plans for future projects will concentrate on further exploration of blog fiction's utopian possibilities. One project, *Strangers*, will expand the range of social media and involve a freer distribution of authorship than *Bad Influences* by curating a collection of social media projects in which participants place characters from utopian settings into their own shoes and record their observations through any social media they choose, eventually finding one another and discussing together the possibilities of an ideal society. Another, *The Nowhere Project*, will be a trilogy of young adult novels in which children from a range of past and future eras meet at a school outside of time, discovering where they are, how they got there and what they must do with reference to a 19th century utopian novel by William Morris⁴ and a similar 21st century blog, which will also exist as an interactive utopian adventure story in the world of the readers.

⁴ William Morris and Clive Wilmer, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1998)

The development of relational poetics through fiction developed within and between social media, beyond the blog, is already well underway; following its progress is likely to be an exciting journey.

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Appendix 1: Feedback Forms

Form 1

15 February 2013

Name

Fiona

Email

[removed]

How did you hear about Bad Influences?

Web Fiction Guide

What made you decide to read Bad Influences?

I plan to review it at some point....

Have you read much blog fiction or web fiction before?

LOADS and LOADS Check out my WFG page. Specifically for blog fiction, "My Stupid Journal" is my current favourite (it's the fictional blog of a 12 year old girl "exiled" in Paris, and much better than the title suggests). I'd say it's less of a believable blog than Bad Influences - it's a little larger than life! and the entries are much more detailed than a 12 year old, or anyone, would really write.

Do you write web fiction yourself?

No.

What platform did you use to read Bad Influences?

I went to the character blogs directly to catch up, but I've also subscribed to it in Google Reader.

How did you navigate the story?

For each character, I clicked on the link, "Start reading X's story" and went through the posts in chronological order. First Ash, then Elaine, then Jack, then Mei.

How often do you check for updates to the story?

I've subscribed in Google Reader to posts and comments, so I'll be keeping up from there.

Are there any other ways that the "real time" posting affects the way you read or respond to the story?

I think it's realistic.

What do you think the reader interaction (i.e. participating in the comments) adds to the story?

I'm not sure which are the readers and which are you, beyond the four main characters and Ben, which I assume are you.

Are you a participant? If so, how does this affect the way you read Bad Influences?

No.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading online/digital fiction that isn't written as a blog?

Yes. It's a unique format, with it's own challenges and opportunities.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading non-digital fiction written as characters' diaries or letters?

The difference is the comments.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading other serialised fiction?

Yes.

Any other comments?

I'm favourably impressed! It's subtle, and very clever. I have the sense of a gathering storm....

Can I e-mail you about your feedback?

Yes

Can I quote from your feedback to publicise the project?

Yes

Form 2

5 May 2013

Name

Deb Foster

Email

[removed]

How did you hear about Bad Influences?

air-I-request listserv

What made you decide to read Bad Influences?

I enjoyed teaching "Riverbend's" Iraqi war blog to my students during the years it was active (mid-2000's), so thought I'd take a moment to check out those of your 4 characters.

Have you read much blog fiction or web fiction before?

Not much ... "Riverbend's" and one of a transgendered former professor who I stumbled across again post-surgery (to help me understand what my former colleagues and s/he were thinking and encountering during the process.

Do you write web fiction yourself?

No

What platform did you use to read Bad Influences?

here on the web

How did you navigate the story?

Haven't started yet! Posting this note first.

How often do you check for updates to the story?

N/A

Are there any other ways that the "real time" posting affects the way you read or respond to the story?

N/A

What do you think the reader interaction (i.e. participating in the comments) adds to the story?

N/A Thinking ahead ... The notion that the entries are pre-written may affect my sense of feeling as if what I say will make a difference.

Are you a participant? If so, how does this affect the way you read Bad Influences?

N/A

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading online/digital fiction that isn't written as a blog?

Not really. Much the same for me as a first-person narrative point-of-view.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading non-digital fiction written as characters' diaries or letters?

Not really.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading other serialised fiction?

N/A; Don't find much time for this.

Any other comments?

Design comment: The white and purple text on the black background is quite difficult to read. With my large monitor and at 150% resolution, it's a little less difficult, but still very hard on the eyes. I hope to find each character's blog is designed with a more-readable formula.

Can I e-mail you about your feedback?

Yes

Can I quote from your feedback to publicise the project?

Yes

Form 3

18 August 2015

Name

Dylan Spicer

Email

[removed]

How did you hear about Bad Influences?

MIX Conference 2013.

What made you decide to read Bad Influences?

A general interest in apocalyptic fiction, and interest in ways of exploring storytelling online.

Have you read much blog fiction or web fiction before?

There is not much blog fiction I currently keep up with regularly. However, I did take part in Dan Tetsell's "Live Ghost Hunt" <http://www.live-ghost-hunt.com/>, which mixed text and audio over Halloween 2011.

Do you write web fiction yourself?

Not currently, although I am planning to start a project in October 2013.

What platform did you use to read Bad Influences?

I went to the character blogs directly, as I felt this was the best way to get a general feel of what the story was about.

How did you navigate the story?

It was a mix. When I first looked I read the first two or three posts for each. I then went to the start of Jack's blog, and began reading. Now I am catching up with that, and checking the others for new posts as they arrive. I intend to catch up with the others from the start.

How often do you check for updates to the story?

I have only been checking for about two weeks, but I have been checking every three or four days, and this is the rate I will most likely continue at.

Are there any other ways that the "real time" posting affects the way you read or respond to the story?

I like the random nature of "real time" posting. It creates a world outside of the blog straight away, and I do consider what the characters are up to. At the same time, I am a big believer in continuity and change in fiction. To give an example, Alan Partridge is one of my favourite comedy characters because his age and career have changed in the different programmes he has been in, bringing much more

emotional connection that most sitcom characters, who remain fixed in certain situations. Real time posting allows this continuity to become an intrinsic part of the story, and adds a genuine sense of realism and change.

What do you think the reader interaction (i.e. participating in the comments) adds to the story?

The reader interaction allows another level of realism to the story, and a random element that provides interesting content in itself- any blog worth its salt will have some regular commenting. It is also interesting how players become personalities in themselves.

Are you a participant? If so, how does this affect the way you read Bad Influences?

I am not currently a participant.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading online/digital fiction that isn't written as a blog?

What is nice about blog fiction is that it uses the strengths of the digital medium to build the story. Blog fiction isn't just a paperback whacked on the internet, but a different method of storytelling altogether.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading non-digital fiction written as characters' diaries or letters?

What is always so difficult about fictional diaries etc is the necessities of publishing elements like bar codes, references etc pulls you from the story. I know a book will never be able to emulate an actual "found journal" and I am huge a fan of series like Adrian Mole without having to pretend they are real, but there are limitations the non-digital medium cannot escape from. But blog fiction feels a lot more like "found footage" movies than traditional non-digital fiction, in that it sucks you into the story by the format alone.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading other serialised fiction?

Blog fiction is great because you never quite know when the next instalment is going to come, and is not forced into one set length or style because of the necessities of publishing- i.e. most comics being 22 pages long. From a sheer cost perspective, it is great to be able to follow a story for free, although I would certainly consider a small monthly fee for blog fiction that I liked.

Any other comments?

I really like the general layout of the site. The “start reading” tab made everything easy to find. At the same time the “hub” website explains the project very nicely, and made the concept easy to understand, both in terms of the story, and the practicalities of participation.

Can I e-mail you about your feedback?

Yes

Can I quote from your feedback to publicise the project?

Yes

Form 4

4 April 2014

Name

Yasmin Radine

Email

[removed]

How did you hear about Bad Influences?

I searched "fictional blogs" on a search engine.

What made you decide to read Bad Influences?

It was fictional and not just a bunch of people reviewing books like some of the other blogs that came up in my search.

Have you read much blog fiction or web fiction before?

I've read Charlotte the college student, but that's it.

Do you write web fiction yourself?

My blog reads like web fiction, but it's a true story and since you ask for the link, it's at www.yasminfortyseven.tk .

What platform did you use to read Bad Influences?

I just read the mobile versions of the blogs online separately.

How did you navigate the story?

I started from the beginning and read to the most recent post.

How often do you check for updates to the story?

I didn't check for updates since the sorry was done by the time I found out about it.

Are there any other ways that the "real time" posting affects the way you read or respond to the story?

Nope.

What do you think the reader interaction (i.e. participating in the comments) adds to the story?

I didn't think the interaction added to the story very much because I wanted to comment, but you said that people had to register to the story before they could be allowed to comment.

Are you a participant? If so, how does this affect the way you read Bad Influences?

No.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading online/digital fiction that isn't written as a blog?

Yes. It makes my brain and eyes hurt more.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading non-digital fiction written as characters' diaries or letters?

Sort of. Diary entries don't have comment sections.

Does reading Bad Influences or other blog fiction feel different to reading other serialised fiction?

No.

Any other comments?

Your excessive use of profanity in your writing keeps me from sharing your blogs with my family and friends.

Can I e-mail you about your feedback?

Yes

Can I quote from your feedback to publicise the project?

No