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Plenty: a speculative fiction

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- Plenty -

a speculative fiction

(working title)

April 28, 2017

Media Studies Senior Project

1st Reader: Tom Ellman

2nd Reader: Michael Joyce

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Where and How to Play the Game:

If you are connected to the internet you should be able to play the game at

<https://trolltamer.itch.io/plenty>

The game is also archived on the Interactive Fiction Database(IFDB) and can be found there under ID: D99DBDCF-C840-4FDA-9B1F-663B47B98E86

<http://ifdb.tads.org/viewgame?id=psog8njnnckqu1ug>

Intro and Goals of the Project

The goal of the project is to engage the player, and have them walk away from the experience with a critical perspective that will encourage reflection on society's relationship with technology. I want to stimulate the audience to examine historical continuities through immersion in an unfamiliar reality, causing them to reimagine the possibilities of their own world.

Ultimately I decided that the most accessible way to facilitate reflection would be to create a speculative fiction narrative, specifically a Twine 2.0 hypertext. This medium combines the fluidity and flexibility of literature with the interactivity of games, ideal for creating empathy in a reader immersed in an unknown world.

Two works which inspired my inquiry into this topic are the film *Ex Machina* and the TV series *Westworld*, both of which consider futures in which humans dominate AI and in doing so explore the exploitation and victimization of technology by humans. These films humanize technology, a radical act in a society which views technology as objects, tools to achieve specific means. This project is an attempt to harness that same novel, subversive perspective and deploy it not only against technophobia but also against global capitalism.

My process for creating the work began by defining the central themes to explore in the narrative: labor, leisure, and relationships with technology. I began to build a world in which to explore these themes, beginning from a general, broad perspective before narrowing in on the specific setting. The essential thematic elements all spring from the game's setting in a fully automated, post-scarcity future, told through both the

perspective of both a farmer and an agricultural AI. The addition of agriculture in the setting highlights the vast difference between humans, dependent on biology, and AI, independent from agriculture. Since AI have no independent motivation to perform agricultural labor their participation suggests an exploitative relationship with humanity, a theme explored in more detail in the story. The narrative simultaneously explores the relationship between the two characters and their environments whilst informing the audience of an imagined global history which contextualize the plot action.

Within the *MDA* framework established by Hunicke et al, this game's core aesthetic focus is narrative, exploration, and fantasy. By avoiding introducing disparate aesthetics such as challenge, community, optimization/efficiency and more, the game is able to be highly focused on the most pertinent and interrelated forms of interactive engagement.

Medium Specifics: Why Interactive Fiction?

Interactive fiction represents an elegant compromise for digital storytelling between literature's open flowing prose and game's graphically realized interactive worlds. Interactive fiction allows the insertion of interaction into narratives, replacing the labor and asset intensive process of creating a fully rendered game world with literary descriptions which evoke worlds which can be just as immersive. Porpentine, a Twine author and new media artist describes the unique accessibility and reach of interactive fiction:

When it comes to feeling something true, a handful of words can outweigh millions of dollars of investment in cutting-edge graphics.

Say I want to communicate that a jungle exists. I could create a jungle out of code, sound files, art assets, or I could describe it in a few well-chosen sentences. They aren't the same, but one is cheaper. If we acknowledge that humans have an imagination, maybe we could make something of these, what do you call them, interactive fictions?

Most importantly, anyone reading this sentence can make interactive fiction.¹

Porpentine harps on the creative and subversive potential of Twine and interactive fiction's low barriers to entry and evocative nature. Porpentine praises Twine for being easy to produce and share, with very low capital requirements, making it an ideal medium for creating anti-hegemonic content, especially speculative fiction. Although works made in Twine run the gamut thematically, compared to mainstream commercial games they

¹ Porpentine, (2012) *Creation Under Capitalism and the Twine Revolution*, <http://nightmaremode.thegamertrust.com/2012/11/25/creation-under-capitalism/>

certainly trend towards the subversive, many taking the form of speculative fiction and tackling societal issues relating to gender, race, sexuality, addiction, capital, and more.

Interactive fiction are generally grouped into two distinct forms, parsers and hypertexts. Text parser games, which were widespread throughout the late 70's and 80's, prompt the player with a written scene and then accept inputs in the form of verbs. Although they are more open ended and allow for creative solutions, parser games run the risk of feeling frustrating or arbitrary as a result of their mechanics. The other major form of interactive fiction is hypertext, which resemble digitized choose your own adventure stories, also visualized as a series of hyperlinks connecting passages.

Hypertext is a particularly appealing medium for speculative fiction because it allows for the creation of a deep, interactive narrative world, without requiring hours of asset production. Narrative direction in these interactive fictions come from more than classical literary techniques, the words chosen to link the next passage can wholly recontextualize its meaning. Additionally, Twine can totally change formatting, including text transition effects, color, font, style and more, all of which can be used to contribute to the the narrative.

One of the essential elements of narrative engagement is intersubjectivity, the displacement of the sense of self from one's own body into that of the character they occupy or identify with in the narrative. While literature is able to generate intersubjectivity, interactivity augments it. Making choices and navigating an environment within the perspective of a character has a way of stimulating empathy for that character. Interactive fiction author and Professor Michael Joyce describes the

relationship between interactive fiction as a medium and intersubjectivity: "Hypertext is a representation of the text that escapes and surprises by turns... Hypertext, only more consciously than other texts, implicates the reader in writing, at least by choosing its sequences."² In the addition of interactivity, the reader is implicated in the narrative, their feelings and choices impact the text. Leveraging this specific capacity for generating empathy and immersion across difference is key to the success of hypertext speculative fiction, especially one merging characters as fundamentally different as humans and AI.

² Michael Joyce, (1997) *Nonce Upon Some Times: rereading hypertext fiction*

Speculative Fiction, Labor, Leisure, and AI:

Science fiction is described by Darko Suvin as: “a realistic unreality... the space of a potent estrangement, validated by the pathos and prestige of the basic cognitive norms of our times.”³ By pushing the boundaries of the real, speculative fiction is able to question aspects of society which are normally invisibilized by their quotidian nature. This cognitive estrangement, as Suvin calls it, is the foundational literary device of speculative fiction, and one of the guiding creative principles of the narrative.

The narrative’s focus on the post-scarcity, fully automated future is meant to generate cognitive estrangement from modern, profit driven society, while considering the massive technological potential to drive change. This narrative’s world is a Marxist dream, a future where the means of production have become so advanced that the worker has been liberated, a society in which production is determined not by profit but by need. This imagined world’s philosophy and aesthetic are encapsulated in the narrative’s setting rooted in labor, agriculture, and AI.⁴



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If workers controlled the means of production in a for-need system, automation would mean vacations, not widespread loss of livelihood.

Although the formation of an era of full automation is an ideological dream for some, it is unrealistic to imagine that human nature would allow it to be a utopia. The

³ Darko Suvin, (1979) *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and history of a Literary Genre*

⁴ Image/Quote from <https://leftist-daily-reminders.tumblr.com/>

narratives exploration of the memory of visiting a friend is meant to prompt cautious consideration of the motivation and incentive structure behind society. Human nature's trend towards dissatisfaction with one's current circumstances is at the heart of this critique of post-scarcity. Although many of our world's problems are in part caused by the pursuit of profit, at least some goal exists for most. In my design document during the worldbuilding phase of pre-production I wrote a passage describing the leisure class:

This unshackled proletariat is satiated largely by community around them, hobbies, personal interests, and the legalization of the sale and use of most recreational drugs. Billions of human consciousnesses floated through the world, unconcerned by their biological constraints, unfettered by societal constraints. To most it felt like freedom, but they were oblivious to the ongoing labor supporting them all.

This is the challenge at the core of the stories speculation: imagining a world in which motivation is totally unrelated to income and filling this existential motivational void. In the creation process of this story I named this post-scarcity amotivation "biological conflict", referring to the incongruity between one's biological motivations and societal motivations. This post-scarcity bioconflict results in directionlessness hinted at in the story through the descriptions and environments of the leisure class, but could be explored much further, perhaps in another story.

In order to prompt the reader for reflection and speculation, about both the narrative's world and our own reality, the position of the narrative voice was essential. The decision to leave the human protagonist ambiguous and open ended allows the player to easily occupy their shoes, especially when they begin to make decisions for the character. These decisions have little effect on the trajectory of the story, but they insert

an element of interactivity and choice for the user that builds intersubjectivity. This narrative ambiguity, although it contributes to the story, was also a major challenge. It was frequently difficult to construct sentences as a result of the lack of names and distinctive pronouns and transitioning the perspective from very open and ambiguous human to specific and embodied AI was particularly challenging. Twine's formatting abilities were a major help in defining the two distinct sections of the story but perhaps the most dramatic difference is in the mechanics.

The human portion of the narrative proceeds largely in linear fashion, although there are some superficial choices available to the player but upon transitioning to the AI perspective the game becomes open ended, allowing exploration around a map that serves as a hub passage. This mechanical contrast between the experience of occupying the two characters differentiates the perspectives while encouraging reflection about one's own relationship to technology, labor, and leisure.

It is impossible to investigate the relationship between labor and leisure, especially in an agricultural setting, without being informed by the historical relationships surrounding agricultural labor. From feudalism to chattel slavery to wage slavery agricultural labor has been mired in suffering and driven by compulsion. In this imagined world where humans are almost totally disconnected from agricultural labor and many consume only synthesized nutritional paste, the burden of agricultural production rests on technology. This technological dependence presents its own set of issues for humanity in the form of biological conflict, but is further complicated by the humanization of AI.

By placing the player in the AI's perspective and allowing freedom of movement and exploration after having been confined to a largely linear story, there is a kind of inversion where the AI, who is least liberated in the narrative, is the most free in their playstyle. Additionally if the global capitalist system leveraged only simple automation, without implicating potentially sentient AI's, then the moral stakes of the story would be much more focused around biological conflict and less around the relationship between humanity and technology.

Improvements and Future Development:

The narrative accomplishes many of its stated goals but there are still potential improvements and challenges that would require additional development time. For example, although the player occupies the perspective of the agricultural AI, they perform none of its labor, it is all just suggested at by simple passages. In my original design I planned to create small mechanical tasks, clicking boxes, dragging shapes etc, to represent the arbitrary labor presented to the AI. Ultimately I wasn't able to implement this labor simulation and the player is left to imagine the AI's experience.

Interactive fiction games, though primarily based in text, often leverage graphics to compliment their stories. I would love to add images to the game, ideally in pixel-art to complement the game's lo-fi style and contrast with the futuristic setting. I think especially in passages with player choice, using small, captioned images to label each choice would create further immersion. The map sequence could also be replaced by pixel art, but whatever additions are made they must be done carefully, without disrupting the narratives ambiguity. The world, although described in detail, is never visually rendered beyond rough ASCII shapes, leaving the viewer to fill in details and build their own speculative reality.

There were three text transition javascript plugins which I was unable to get working which would have been a huge boon to the story's formatting, specifically for the AI passages. All 3 of the plugins are focused around text animations, I tried two different implementations to type out each passage letter by letter, reminiscent of an NES era rpg. The third plugin was similar but instead randomly flickered replacements of individual

characters giving the text a “corrupted” or “encrypted” style. I have seen both of these text effects implemented in other Twine projects but was unable to recreate the same functionality myself. Specifically the typewriter transition would be used to emphasize the computerized perspective of the AI passages, especially in the boot up and shutdown sequences, while the corrupted transition would be used to highlight individual passages which challenge the AI’s boundaries, such as the passage about the self, or the hidden cave. These text format changes would add a new layers of production value and immersiveness to the story without having to rearrange the narrative.

One of the pitfalls of the project was the election to use the default Twine story format, Harlowe. The format is highly accessible and has self-explanatory syntax, but is not nearly as robust in terms of customization as the Sugarcube format. If I were to expand the story or re-write it I would strongly consider using Sugarcube or another Twine format which supports more customization since ultimately my largest technical challenges were due to the lack of simple Javascript support in Harlowe.

Finally, the narrative could be expanded. Ultimately I would like to see this post-scarcity world fleshed out in a much more well rounded way. I envision this narrative as simply one small story from within the imagined world with many more waiting to be written. The world’s novel construction begs for more exploration of both light and dark, perhaps from the perspective of the leisure class, either from the perspective of a drug distributor, or the perspective of a community leader.

In addition to expanding the plot itself, the design of the story could also be reconfigured, allowing for truly branching narratives or even an RPG like progress system

with greatly expanded navigation. The addition of a win/loss state in the ending would also create the possibility of more explicitly constructed moralities or metrics of success.

Although these elements would increase the scope and production time of the game they could also add new depth to the narrative and explore additional themes. The biological conflict concept could be explored through an RPG like system that incentivizes behaviors unexpectedly, undermining traditional motivation and incentives while mechanically suggesting the vast difference from our known world.

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