

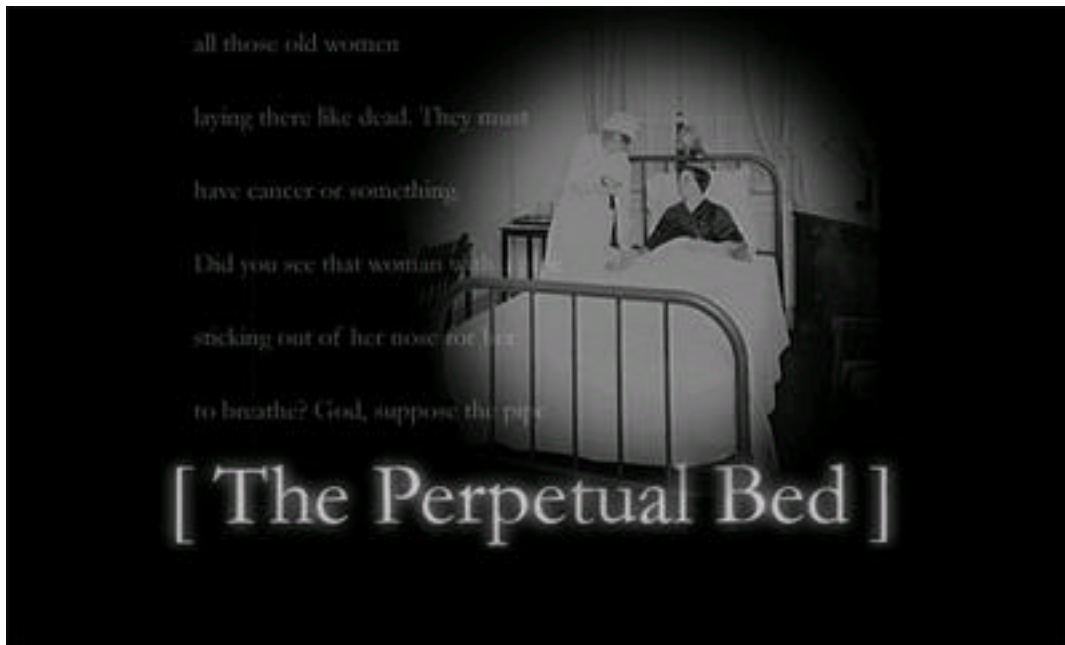
I n t r o d u c t i o n t o [t h e p e r p e t u a l b e d]

M a r y F l a n a g a n

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When beginning this project, I found that many online community spaces were perpetuating and replicating and enacting communities found physically around us. Online spaces such as Alphaworld are examples of the colonization of cyberspace via suburban values. Inside Alphaworld, one builds a virtual house, gets an address, chooses a color for the lawn, and acquires a mailbox as the worlds are gridded and parceled out to users in a system reminiscent of activities during a Land Rush rather than what we would perhaps dream up in a virtual environment.

I hold a firm belief that cyberspace should be used to tell a variety of different stories; the stories I am interested concern daily life, struggles, and human experience. Because of the unique properties of digital environments, I want to use them to attempt to reconfigure and spatialize history and memory. My guiding question concerns both the act of navigating—or performing—the 3D space, as well as the perception of three dimensional virtual spaces and characters and how they are implicitly engendered through their context, creation, and representation. Ultimately, I wish to explore the possibility for using online space in the third dimension to create “navigable narratives.”



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While I was thinking about the piece, my grandmother became very ill. At 91, living in good health by herself in a small Wisconsin town, Grandma was lucky not to have known major illnesses or disease. One

night she blew her nose too hard and suffered a nose bleed. The nose bleed weakened her so much she collapsed in her home, far from a phone or help. When she came to, she crawled to the bed, and instead of calling for help, she thought she might just be able to sleep off whatever had come over her. Finally, one of the relatives called her, and she mentioned her collapse and the fact that she could not get out of bed. Help arrived, she was taken to a city hospital 2 hours away in Milwaukee, and through the course of this developed pneumonia.

I stayed with my grandmother at the hospital during the eight-to-eight visiting hours for a week after she got ill. She could barely feed herself from shaking so much (medication and lack of oxygen in the blood), but she could talk and drift in and out of sleep. She had terrible, fantastic, and funny dreams while ill, and the dreams acted out in the space of her room, a space which lost its taupe walls and hospital-huge doors to expand into a wake-dream world. One morning, for example, she asked me what they had put under the bed.

“I suppose it was something to get rid of the smell, you know. Being stuck in this bed all day, it probably is smelly. Anyway what ever it was swirled out in a mist or something around the bed all night. All around, then up. Swooshing around in circles, a fog. Wonder what kind of stuff they put under there, anyway.”

In her less lucid moments, I could see Grandma staring off and silently wording things in this wake-dream state. Stiff from supporting herself to breathe, thin chest heaving for air, she had a frightening pallor and unnatural posture that made me understand how alarmingly close she was to the other side. Then, of course, there were the interactions between the waking and dreaming world. Grandma mentioned that people kept coming up to her bed, many times, all kinds of people, and she'd give them chocolate chip cookies as they went on their way. Some of these people were dead, some were nurses or the faces of strangers. Sitting in the room with her, my skin tingled with the feeling of paths crossing, of energies exchanging, and I realized that even though there was a lot going on that I could not see, I could sure feel it. But Grandma—she interacted.

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I decided to find other stories of fainting, illness, and otherworldly experiences as a result of the health of the body from real, historical people. My search led me to the US Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, where I found the WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection. I primarily explored the collection, “American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 – 1940.” These stories were assembled during the time of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which put 8,500,000 jobless to work during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Federal Writers' Project published a collection of books and also left a lesser-known legacy: over 10,000 interviews with men and women from all ages, classes, and ethnic groups from across the country were collected during the late 1930s.

Many of the pieces resembled my grandmother's stories from her youth on the farm. During the 1930s, my grandmother was in her 20s, working as a schoolteacher in an ill-equipped one-room country schoolhouse, and her memories of the hazards, the refreshing joys, and the difficulty of early 20th century country life closely correlated with some of the stories in the Writer's projects.

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The idea behind performing the piece through movement instead of pre-scripted animation came to me as a result of my grandmother's interaction with her dream space. It seemed to me more than a nonlinear narrative—it was a spatialized narrative that took place around her bed during her illness.

Performance as a term implies the manner in which a process is carried out. Performativity suggests doing according to prescribed ritual; it can also mean “to give a rendition of.” I can never indeed experience what my grandmother did, and even if I did, I would feel it differently. The same is true for any audience

member. So performance as “a rendition” through movement seems appropriate because first, it adds the element of experience that a piece of visual or auditory nature at each viewing event; and second, because it changes from viewer to viewer, from time to time, because the narrative is constructed in an entirely different way each performance through the navigation.

Lyotard focused upon the event and upon “performativity” as a working principle of knowledge—that a figure could claim its own descriptive space no more or no less “universal” than any other. He said “No single instance of narrative can exert a claim to dominate narratives standing beyond it.”¹ This piece uses performativity as a general operating strategy—it’s an activity that allows the operation of improvisatory experimentation based on the perceived needs and desires of a situation. I call it navigable because it also spatializes the smaller meta-narratives in the story, giving no one particular tract or story an inherent authority or truth. It is fluid and changes each time it is traveled.

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This piece is called [the perpetual bed] and is about my 91 year old grandmother’s experiences when critically ill and hospitalized. It is an online, virtual VRML world in which users can interact with each other from within a navigable, surrealistic narrative situated in the world of my grandmother’s dreamstate. A hybrid between video, interactive art, installation, and animation, the relies on the movement of the user/viewer to encounter my grandmother's experiences with transparent yet tangible beings, memories, and places engaged with when hospitalized. It can be multi-user or single user, depending on the context.

The “script” or “dialogue” in the multi-user version is a collage of the words from the WPA interviews, quotes from my grandmother, and memories I have of family history. Multiperson interaction takes place in these versions of the piece through a technology I have designed called Navigable Chat. Users can perceive each other through their textual presence. My goal is to tell a story in an altogether new way -- that of allowing the user to move through a story, to “happen” upon a scene, and to find their own meaning in this ever-enacted place. Users can then leave their mark and become part of the story--leave hints, impressions, etc--for the next viewer. This residue becomes part of the world, ready for the next user to discover.

¹ .” Readings, Bill. Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics. London: Routledge, 1991, p. 69