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***GENRE AND LANGUAGE: DEFINING TEMPORAL, PHYSICAL AND NON-
PHYSICAL SPACES IN SPECULATIVE TECHNO-DYSTOPIAN FICTION***

MARY PACKER

Exegesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a PhD. by Publication and accompanied by a hard copy of

The Game is Altered (2012)

The University of Huddersfield

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Abstract

Genre and language: Defining temporal, physical and non-physical spaces in speculative, techno-dystopian fiction.

My second novel, *The Game is Altered* (hereafter *TGiA*), is a hybrid literary form. Its distinctiveness arises out of the fact that it successfully draws on a mixture of genres, tropes and linguistic devices to delineate the spatio-temporal textual environment as well as the fictive space of the novel. This, the accompanying exegesis, examines the associated issues of genre that hybridity brings, with particular focus on dystopian, outsider and existential fiction. It goes on to examine issues of space and time in the novel with an emphasis on linguistic forms and how they define and depict fictive representations of the real and the virtual and concludes that *TGiA* has, to a greater or lesser extent, successfully defined its temporal, psycho-social and fictive spaces and in doing so has expressed the techno-dystopian concepts that conform to the emerging speculative, posthuman literary phenomenon.

Chapter one begins by locating *TGiA* within dystopian, outsider and existentialist fiction. The analysis focusses on narratives that encompass techno-dystopian visions such as *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984) and “The Machine Stops” (Forster, 1909) and goes on to examine the case for *TGiA* as a quasi-migration/diasporic narrative, as well as comparing *TGiA* with existential novels that deal with authenticity and identity. Chapter two analyses issues of time and space in *TGiA* with specific reference to Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope (1937) and Elena Gomel’s notion of *timeshape* (2010). There is further analysis of the relationship between utopian and dystopian places as well as virtual spaces as an escapist (or anti-alienation) tool that connote a non-hegemonic safe space in the vein of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia (1967). The chapter moves to issues of language and outlines various types of invented language from full grammatical/syntactical creations to more stylised, compound formations including code poetry from practitioners such as Mez Breeze. The chapter also recounts how the language in *TGiA* evolved and makes comparisons with *Riddley Walker* (Hoban, 1980) and *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2004). Here, I propose that what sets the novel apart from other speculative narratives is that rather than using more traditional, temporal or culturally anchored language shifts, the language transformations in *TGiA* delineate real and virtual spaces as well as the fictive space of the novel.

Finally, the exegesis concludes that through the elision of dystopian, existential and outsider tropes the novel represents a significant contribution to existing and emerging literary oeuvres and successfully delineates temporal, psycho-social and fictive spaces through the use of alternating standard and stylised language.

Introduction

This introduction outlines my evolution as a writer and the creative impetus for writing *The Game is Altered* (hereafter *TGiA*). It then reviews the body of the exegesis and its analyses of genre, spatio-temporal issues in fiction and the implementation of stylised language forms to define and articulate fictive spaces in *TGiA*. Finally, the introduction summarises how *TGiA* represents an original contribution to knowledge by virtue of the way it delineates the spaces of the novel using language, and further, that it represents a distinctive work of speculative, techno-dystopian fiction that is part of an emerging posthuman literary phenomenon.

Background

In 2009 my first novel, *Among Thieves*, was published to critical acclaim. It is the story of two *wannabe* gangsters in the 1980s taking their first steps in the criminal underworld. The novel achieved several literary prize nominations and my agent encouraged me to write more of the same. In 2012, *TGiA* was published. As with *Among Thieves* it has crime and gangsters, but it leaves the 1980s behind for a cyber-obsessed near future where two distinct worlds co-exist: the real world and a virtual world, called *CoreQuest*.

The idea for *TGiA* evolved through my academic research on computer mark-up languages, surveillance culture and internet technologies, in particular Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing Games. MMORPGs are constructed, persistent state worlds (PSWs) where players interact in real time. Games have thousands of players who generate and/or customise their characters (avatars). The PSW is never static and avatars are rewarded with status/achievement. I was inspired to use a virtual

environment (VE) as one of the novel's settings. This would allow me to incorporate a dual timeframe and dual spaceframe narrative where characters could be rendered as different versions of themselves. Careful planning of *TGiA*'s structure, therefore, was paramount and I chose to situate the real world and the VE in alternate chapters throughout the novel. The corporeal chapters are written in the third-person from Lionel Byrd's (my protagonist) point of view, while the VE chapters are in the first-person from his avatar, Ludi's point of view. Also, Ludi's chapters are written in a stylised linguistic form and preceded by short sections written from the point of view of a mysterious @GameAddict. The @GameAddict sections serve as a commentary on the themes of the novel and have a date stamp that situates the reader in the near-future. Using this structure, I was able to describe the protagonist, Lionel Byrd, as a sad tech-worker-drone in the real world but in *CoreQuest*, he is Ludi, an heroic warrior avatar.

Also, by rendering my protagonist as an avatar I could explore another of my research interests—posthumanism. Katherine Hayles defines the posthuman subject as “a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” or more simply “the union of the human with the intelligent machine” (2008, pp.2-3). The contrast between Lionel's virtual and corporeal lives highlights this and the idea that “information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates” (Hayles, 2008, p.1). And so the novel touches on various notions parallel to posthumanism such as technological embodiment and virtual transmigration.

I understood that these concepts and the fictive VE would raise issues of genre and also issues of space and chronology, since there are questions around the geographical location(s) of cyberspace and also the idea that science fiction (SF)

“creates a cognitive space . . . between real and fictional worlds, which the reader must negotiate” (Malmgren, 1991, p.11). Additionally, there are issues around how time and distance are expressed in VEs and I knew I would need to make creative choices about how the corporeal and the virtual environments in the novel were articulated. In the end, as I have mentioned, I decided to use standard English for the corporeal sections and a heavily stylised linguistic form for the VE. Since the stylised form employed various compound structures and neologisms this would naturally raise concomitant issues of language.

Thus, the exegesis is in two parts. The first chapter, **Issues of Genre**, defines and examines the intersection of genres in the novel and makes a case for the novel’s distinctiveness by virtue of its hybridity and thus its position in the emerging posthuman literary phenomenon. The second chapter, **Issues of Time, Space and Language**, analyses time and space in the novel and demonstrates *TGiA*’s contribution to knowledge through its effective delineation of fictive space by virtue of its peculiar, stylised linguistic form.

Issues of Genre

A deeper analysis of *TGiA*’s genre and its position in the complex Venn diagram of speculative fiction is explored in detail in Chapter 1: Issues of Genre. I begin by explaining the shift from literary to genre fiction between my first and second novels. Literary fiction commands more kudos than genre fiction and, like other literary writers who utilise SF tropes in their work, I was resistant to a hard SF classification of *TGiA*. Also, the technology described in the novel already exists and I considered the work sci-fact rather than SF. But more than that, I intended *TGiA* as a work of dystopian, existential/outsider fiction—after all, my protagonist is a mixed heritage

loner experiencing liminal delusions and an identity crisis and so parallels with existential outsiders such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 1866), Meursault in *The Outsider* (Camus, 1942) and Harry Haller in *Steppenwolf* (Hesse, 1927) seemed appropriate despite the futuristic setting (Wilson, [1956] 1970). However, I was also aware that the VE would mean the novel would fall into various SF sub-genres. Indeed, as the work took shape its posthuman/cyber fiction credentials began to emerge.

After publication, the reviews (see Appendix I) and analyses confirmed these genre issues. *Sci-Fi Now* magazine dubbed the work “post-cyberpunk” while Henry Sutton (*Daily Mirror*) called it a “smart, ultra-contemporary and ... deeply questioning novel-cum-thriller about where we are going with our identities.” Laura-Jane Devanny (2014), however, situates the novel as part of an emerging genre which provides “a site of critical engagement for posthumanism, changing embodiment and projected technologies” and argued that such novels offer “critiques of the way technology and culture produce new models of human identity”.

Hence, the exegesis examines the work’s speculative/posthuman credentials and how the various genres it draws on deal with concepts of techno-dystopia versus techno-utopia. Fittingly, too, the chapter makes a case for the novel as a hybrid form and notes the elision of dystopian, existential and outsider tropes to create a speculative, near-future fiction that is part of an emerging posthuman literary form.

Issues of Space and Time

Much has been written about the intersection of time, space and virtuality—and specifically temporal questions raised by human-machine interaction. Schroeder, for example, describes virtual environments as requiring the user “to have a sense of

being present” (2008, p.1), except that “being there” is not about being anywhere at all and hence time and space are more about collaborative interaction than geography and chronology. As VEs proliferate the distinction between what is real and unreal, and what chronology (if any) they have, is increasingly difficult to determine.

What is clear is the (often) negative effects of MMORPGs on human experience. They can impact wellbeing on a “physical and a psychological level” (Hsu et al., 2009, p.990). While I was writing the novel, news stories were beginning to link the pathological use of virtual games with depression and obsessive behaviour.¹ In fact, a student of mine who played up to 20 hours a day, told me: “The only place I feel happy and safe is inside the game.” Habitual gamers, it seems, can literally lose themselves in the VE and this lostness, both digital and psychological, became the novel’s thematic touchstone.

In terms of the digital setting, I devised *CoreQuest* as an MMORPG-inspired platform, similar to World of Warcraft² (WoW), where people could customise their own avatars and interact with players all over the world. These environments are known as a persistent state worlds (PSW) or “automated, shared, persistent environment[s] ... through which people can interact ... by means of a virtual self” (Bartle, 2009, p.23). These worlds are capable of transporting a user out of reality and, more importantly, keeping them there.

Consequently, *CoreQuest* has its own culture, timeline and internal logic as opposed to the real time, spaces and culture of Lionel’s objective reality. This counterpoint, I hoped, would have the scope and depth to underpin certain ideas

¹ Yonhap news agency reported a couple who raised a virtual girl and allowed their own child to starve. [Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/05/korean-girl-starved-online-game>]. A man in Taegu died after playing StarCraft for more than fifty hours. Starcraft wikia [available at http://starcraft.wikia.com/wiki/StarCraft_Wiki]

² Official WoW site [available at <http://bit.ly/1UHAYGq>]

around VEs as escape spaces or modern heterotopia, which Foucault defined as a real space that performs “the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory” ([1967] 1997, p.336) and which I also compare with Oldenburg’s (1989) notion of “third places” (public or social environments that are separate from home and work). The majority of this section, however, examines *TGiA*’s geography and chronology, both in respect of the temporal flow of the novel and its genre-specific timespace. Here I make particular reference to Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope which he defines as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (1981, p.84) (and which indicate a work’s specific genre). I then compare Bakhtin’s chronotope to Elena Gomel’s notion of timeshape, which she defines as units of “ideologically charged meaning” (2010, p.x) which situate a work in historical and political time as well as fictive time.

At the end of this section I conclude that *TGiA*’s distinctiveness lies in its ambition to express both Bakhtin and Gomel’s ideas by delineating not only space and time but also cultural and political ideas using stylised language.

Language

In *TGiA*, I wanted to demonstrate the concept of Utopian actualization; or the need to delineate space, not only by defining the limbic/spatial boundaries of the world but also the linguistic boundaries of a space, whether that space operates within a nation state or a tribe or religion or clique, or in this case a VE. In order to achieve this, the real-world sections would remain in standard English and the VE sections would use a stylised linguistic form.

Developing the novel, I spent time researching fantasy-based MMORPGs. I noticed that these games often depict curious creatures wielding oddly-named artefacts that have no immediate equivalent in the player's existing language. Game developers, and their scenario writers, finely work virtual worlds both visually and linguistically, but further, players construct their own linguistic forms to communicate within the games. Additionally, I discovered a well-documented world of "gamer speak", which utilises a form referred to by researchers as Hacker Speak or Leet Speak (written 1337 5p34k) and so named because of its symbol and numeric-rich construction. Leet Speak emerged organically out of the language of coding itself and became increasingly nuanced even after the initial impetus for its construction had diminished (Carooso, 2004). However, my interest in alternative languages wasn't exclusively code-based. In my teens, I witnessed Pentecostal glossolalia which, like Leet Speak, defined a group and its culture, and was vocalised in its exclusive spaces.³ This, among other things, inspired the use of stylised language as a demarcation device in the novel.

The exegesis concludes that *TGiA* epitomises a hybrid literary/speculative tradition. But by bringing together concepts of technological embodiment and digital transmigration it is also part of an emerging form that is examining posthumanism. Further, through its experiments in language and the delineation of space—real, virtual and fictive—*TGiA* defines timespace in the novel in a distinctive way. In all other novels, stylised linguistic forms represent a future society or an alien species, or it is utilised throughout the entirety of the novel to express a prevailing idea or culture. But *TGiA* delineates space within the same timeframe and it does so with the

³ Pentecostal glossolalia emphasises baptism with the Holy Spirit and is the phenomenon of vocalising an incomprehensible language as part of the religious worship.

linguistic energy that the gamers and hackers employ, and hence creates a distinct speculative, posthuman timespace.

Chapter 1: Issues of Genre

The study of VR, internet technologies and posthumanism is ample fodder for the SF writer's imagination. But despite my academic preoccupations my knowledge of the SF canon, when I began *TGiA*, was basic and I felt uneasy situating the novel in a landscape with which I was unfamiliar. Added to which, my first novel, *Among Thieves*, was marketed and received as literary fiction and I was aware of a certain snobbery in literary circles regarding genre fiction and that even established authors working with SF tropes resisted a hard, SF label (Margaret Atwood (2004), for example).⁴ And so while I didn't want to risk reinscribing hierarchies of value I did assume, perhaps naïvely, that my own categorisation of the novel would have some bearing on the way it was promoted: that is, I considered *TGiA* to be a work of literary fiction which happened to include SF tropes and I expected the book to be marketed and received as such.

Looking back, however, I recognised that SF-themed films and TV shows had piqued my interest over the years and so I conducted an audit of those narratives that had made an impression—*Blade Runner*⁵ (1982), *Tron* (1982) and *Star Trek* (1966-1969) among them. It is not surprising, then, that my novel drew on similar ideas. But while I understood *TGiA* would, in some respects, leave the realms of contemporary realism behind, it came as a shock when the novel found its way onto the SF shelves of libraries and I was invited to speak at SF events around the UK. The novel even

⁴ In *Moving Targets* (2004), Atwood describes SF as “fiction in which things happen that are not possible today” and describes her own “non-mainstream” work as “speculative fiction” since everything that happens in them *is* possible.

⁵ *Blade Runner* (1982) is Ridley Scott's loose adaptation of Philip K Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)

achieved runner-up in *Sci-Fi Magazine's* Top Five Science Fiction Books in 2012 and I felt, somehow, that it had been pigeon-holed without my consent.⁶

David Duff maintains that “most of us ... at some level [are] resistant to, or suspicious of, the concept of genre”. This, he says, is because the “rules” and “conventions” of genre theory appear to “deny the autonomy of the author, deny the uniqueness of the text, deny spontaneity, originality and self-expression” (2014, p.1). This implied repudiation of the writer’s free will certainly fed into my resistance to a SF classification with regards to *TGiA*. However, Jonathan Crimmins in his dissection of Derrida’s “The Law of Genre” (1980), explains the shift away from a rigid, taxonomical understanding of genre towards the examination of genre as “the cultural conditions that enable textual production” (2009, p.46). Certainly, throughout the twentieth century, genre theorists have described the erosion of genre rules and conventions and this, David Duff argues, is due to the ascendancy of popular culture, which, despite its “apparent rejection by the literary avant-garde” is a “conspicuous ... feature of Postmodernism”. Hence, postmodernity (and popular culture) have contributed to the demise of genre whilst simultaneously increasing its value (Duff, 2014, pp.1-2).

Nevertheless, the issue of genre was not at the forefront of my mind at the time of writing *TGiA*. Looking back, as I’ve said, I did view SF, specifically, and genre in general, as something institutional—something fixed and immovable—hence the resistance I mentioned earlier (and in the introduction). But gradually I became aware that genre theorists have begun to consider the institution of genre as a much broader church. As far back as 1942, Welleck et al, for example, describe the

⁶ [Available at: <https://www.scifinow.co.uk/top-tens/10-things-we-learned-from-the-star-trek-into-darkness-preview/>]

institutions of genre as generous, even porous: “One can work through, express oneself through, existing institutions, create new ones, or get on, so far as possible, without sharing in politics or rituals; one can also join, but then reshape institutions” (1942, p.226). Similarly, Fishelov emphasises the role of the reader and the writer in shaping the text itself:

[T]he reader demands compliance with the established generic conventions so that he can integrate the new text, but at the same time he expects the writer to manipulate these established conventions so that the new text is more than a tedious repetition of the generic tradition. (Fishelov, 1993, p.90)

Perhaps unconsciously, therefore, I adopted the Derridean stance of the “democratic citizen” with regards to genre; someone “who participates in the State without belonging to it as a subject” (Crimmins, 2009, p.47). But consciously, it was more porousness and magnanimity I had in mind as I approached the issue of genre in *TGiA*.

Still, it would be disingenuous to claim that I did not consider where *TGiA* might ‘sit’ in the literary landscape. For instance, I felt that thematically there would be more than a passing nod to the existentialist project as well as dystopian, near-future narratives and also to aspects of outsider fiction. These initial attributions in terms of the novel’s categorisation will be examined in this chapter as well as associated attributions which have come out of my analyses and which underpin my primary argument—that *TGiA* engages with various genres and tropes such as existential fiction and the motif of the outsider and that it is a successful speculative/techno-dystopian hybrid.

An argument for Dystopian Fiction

So this is Utopia, is it? Well—

I beg your pardon, I thought it was Hell.

Max Beerbohm (1895)⁷

A clear intention for *TGiA* was that its places, or settings, would be apprehended as dystopian with all the attendant philosophical messiness (and subtexts) this label would engender. Dystopian fiction comes under the broader heading of speculative fiction and has its origins in anti-utopianism, which began to emerge as far back as the eighteenth century with narratives such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). It wasn't until the twentieth century that dystopian fiction became a literary force, initially with the nightmarish narratives of Jack London (*The Iron Heel*, 1908) and E.M Forster ("The Machine Stops", 1909). Scholars, however, take various approaches to a definition, although there is broad agreement that if utopia is an ideal or a good place then dystopia must be its mirror image—a bad place. But as Beerbohm so aptly points out (above), one man's utopia is another man's hell and the symbiotic relationship between the two places or states is examined in speculative texts as diverse as *Brave New World* (1932) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

Dystopia, then, is "a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin, Tilley, Prakash, 2010, p.1). Lyman Tower Sargent (1994) suggests that dystopian fictions are like the Old Testament jeremiads which outline the punishments God will mete out if sinners fail to repent. The dystopia, either implicitly or explicitly, warns the reader that "if you behave thus

⁷ The lines reproduced here were found in the autographed manuscript of one of Beerbohm's poems.

and so, this is how you will be punished” (Sargent, 1994, p.8). Gregory Claeys (2013) on the other hand considers dystopian fiction as proffering a case for secular perfectability: there is always hope for a better future, even without a God. However, he acknowledges that genre issues persist since the concepts enshrined in these narratives are socio-political and not purely literary and the dystopia “rather than being the negation of utopia, paradoxically may be its essence” (Claeys, 2013, p.15). Thus dystopian fiction, often through tales of rebellion and subversion, offers the reader a critique of contemporary society that may be both “a form of resistance in and for our times” (Baccolini, 2013, p.45) and “a necessary step towards a better world” (Ashworth, 2013, p.70). Rather than the genre tending towards negative visions of humanity’s hopelessness, dystopian fiction reflects instead what Geoghegan describes as humanity’s perennial state of “gloomy optimism” in which we move continually between “fearing for the worst and hoping for the best” (2013, p.48) — and I would add, fighting for the best.

Claeys’ apprehension of dystopian fiction as socio-political commentary and Geoghegan’s “gloomy optimism” come together in *TGiA*. Lionel inhabits two distinct worlds: the corporeal and the virtual. His real world is an unfathomable dystopia that echoes the baffling barrage of misinformation we must currently parse in modern society, but the virtual games he plays, like the digital distractions we circumnavigate today, seem to offer an escape to utopian freedom. The reader understands that *CoreQuest* is an extension of the dystopic society in which Lionel lives and so the novel deconstructs this binary. But still the disembodied voice of the short @GameAddict sections insists that, at least “you know what you’re *for* on the Game Layer” (Packer, 2012, p.45). On the Game Layer there is always the capacity to enhance your *self* and your experience and achieve a status unattainable in real life.

Furthermore, *CoreQuest* appears to offer the potential for life after death, or at least a way of explaining the vagaries of life and death. On several occasions Lionel lyricises about the possibility of going “back to default mode” and wonders if death is merely “a nip into the Void for a spell before the Creator sets your avatar down in a new dimension to be reincarnated again and again” (Packer, 2012, p.290). Certainly, by meticulously programming and uploading avatars, Lionel feels he has cheated death where Buddha, his cat, is concerned, and the final chapter suggests he achieves the same for himself. *CoreQuest*, then, seems to offer a quasi-utopian counterpoint to the dystopic real-world experience. The “gloomy optimism” offered by technology, for Lionel, lies in the VE as a mechanism of escape and its potential to transcend his corporeality altogether.

Here it’s worth unpacking the requirements of the speculative dystopian narrative beyond offering a “what if” vision of the future. Robert Heinlein argues that speculative fiction must be anchored in a world “possible to the universe as we know it” (1989, p.49) and this supports my decision that *TGiA* should only describe existing technology. But R.B Gill argues that speculative fiction should present “modes of being that *contrast* with (...) audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” [my italics] (2013, p.73) and his position echoes Darko Suvin’s notion of “cognitive estrangement” which insists the narrative must provide “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (Suvin, 1979, pp.8-9). These requirements appear to conflict, but familiarity and estrangement are natural bedfellows and fundamental to *TGiA*, not only in the contrast between the VE and the corporeal sections but also since both environments are familiar and estranging. The quasi-utopian fantasy of *CoreQuest*, for example, contains incredible creatures and lands and underlines Suvin’s idea of SF being “wedded to a hope of finding in the

unknown the ideal environment”. Yet these sections also employ heroic/gaming tropes that are recognisable despite the stylised language. Ludi is a heroic muscle man, for example, whose *raison d'être* is to fight and quest; he must collect “keys” and “artefacts” in order to enter the “Core” and defeat the “Big Boss” (Packer, 2012, p.122). This terminology is consistent with the jargon of many MMORPGs. Similarly, Lionel’s real-world existence, with all its familiar technology, also conforms to Heinlein’s insistence on a possible universe—and yet the text here presents futuristic concepts which make it uncanny. Thus, both sections work as a “surrogate for ordinary reality” (Gill, 2013, p.81) which, like myth, offers the reader a way of looking “beneath the empiric surface” of their subjective reality (Suvin, 1972, p.375).

However, the variant of speculative dystopian fiction to which *TGiA* most closely aligns, and the one I want to expand on, can first be found in E.M Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909). This is the progenitor of modern technodystopian fiction and where I intend to locate *TGiA* in the following paragraphs. It portrays a society in which humans have come to rely on a giant machine to provide all their physical and spiritual needs and where people live in isolation, communicating only via a kind of instant messaging system. The apocalypse comes when the machine breaks down and the protagonists are unable survive. Technodystopian fiction’s principal trope, then, is society’s erosion and/or downfall precipitated by humanity’s over-reliance on machines. Films as early as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and more recently *The Matrix* (1999) and *Ex-Machina* (2014), as well as books such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Dick, 1968) and *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984) fall into this category.

Another concept central to these narratives is humanity’s descent (or ascent, depending on your point of view) into posthumanism, which Dinerstein defines as

“the imminent transformation of the human body through ... biotechnology ... nanotechnology and ... robotics” (2006, p.570). For Katherine Hayles, human-machine integration represents a “coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed” (2008, p.35). For some, the benefits of posthumanism cannot come soon enough. For others, the transition must be stopped by any means. Indeed, Daniel Dinello argues that the function of narratives such as *TGiA* is to contrast posthuman visions of “techno-heaven” with its corresponding “techno-hell”. Techno-heaven is where you can “discard your body, digitize your mind and download your identity into the artificial brain of a computer” (Dinello, 2005, p.1).

The high priests of techno-utopianism hail the “perfection and immortality” this will bring and Lionel certainly subscribes to this view since it chimes with his project to reincarnate himself and his loved ones online. However, his optimism is in sharp contrast to the numerous SF narratives which warn of “the long twilight and decline of the human species” (Dinello, 2005, p.2) and rather than perfect versions of ourselves we will become the bio-slave fodder of intelligent machines. Dinello insists this is already underway and argues that in modern warfare, at least, humans “have been subsumed into weaponized systems and themselves function as the slave-like tools of technology” (2005, p.3). And so throughout *TGiA* the tension between techno-heaven and techno-hell is sustained by gently interrogating Dinello’s utopian and dystopian apprehensions of posthumanism. In the third-person sections, for example, the drama of machine versus man, like Forster’s “The Machine Stops”, presupposes an insidious reliance on technology that has resulted in social entropy. Lionel’s world is “virtual everything” (sic), the streets are run down, cameras perch

“high on their gimbals [and] scan the crowds like mechanical vultures with kino eyes” (Packer, 2012, p.70). Meanwhile the populace stare at their devices and self-actualise in their VEs.

But the novel goes further and distills the notion that posthuman projections (fictive as they stand) are unutterably complex. In her online lecture, Laura-Jane Devanny (2014) situates *TGiA* as part of the speculative, posthuman literary phenomenon, citing aspects of the novel that present the self as separate from embodiment. Certainly, Lionel feels happiest when he operates “like part of a fantastic machine” (Packer, 2012, p.71) and in the game, when he can transcend his corporeal self altogether. Even within *CoreQuest*, there is the potential for transcendent experience. At one point, for example, the combatants lose “their discrete forms” and merge with one another “as if a continuum was contained in all movement and everything existed at once. Time was everywhere. Everything belonged to everything else” (Packer, 2012, p.338). But it is through his indefatigable experiments to digitally perfect and immortalise himself and his loved ones that Lionel epitomises the posthuman subject. Devanny argues, therefore, that *TGiA* and novels like it provide “models for, and critiques of, the way technology and culture produce new models of human identity” (2014). Stefan Herbrechter goes further and argues that posthumanism “as an aesthetic development” can be seen, not only as humanity’s movement towards new forms of embodiment, but as “a descriptor of sociocultural transformation” (2015, pp.3-4).

Forster’s eponymous machine malfunctions, of course, and his protagonists realise they have relinquished the animal skills they need to survive. In this sense, Forster prophesies society’s current anxieties. Unlike Forster, as I’ve said, I was

careful to include only current technology such as cameras the size of houseflies, immersive tech, mobile tracking devices and the movement of money and contraband using MMORPGs and the dark web.⁸ Here, my intention was to bring immediacy and prescience to the narrative and certainly the impulse in writing *TGiA* was to question the efficacy of our current weddedness to technology and where our relationship might lead—while not necessarily suggesting a divorce.

Nevertheless, *TGiA* portrays an unhappy marriage. Society is in turmoil—as it is now—and political and ecological migrants are being held in detention centres. Swathes of land are being “appropriated for replacement fuel and solar development” (Packer, 2012, p.18) while riots are breaking out in border towns and ports. All this, and the general populace is largely oblivious: plugged into the cloud, viewing the world through devices called Spex™, bombarded with propaganda and encouraged to escape into immersive VEs. This mirrors current news stories and upholds Claeys’ assertion that dystopian fiction enshrines socio-political rather than purely literary concepts.

Lionel’s power and status in *CoreQuest* suggest parallels with Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2012) which describes a society where people operate almost exclusively online. Cline’s vision of disembodied virtuality includes one or two sinister asides as well as the obvious commentary about the need to escape a ruined society/planet. But for Cline, virtuality is largely positive. In *CoreQuest* however there are hordes of non-human characters called Grinders—the oppressed digital rank-and-file of the realm. Their plight highlights the fact that this constructed utopia has been built on the same principles as the dystopian real world and underlines Beerbohm’s maxim that one man’s utopia is always another man’s (or in this case,

⁸ This impacts issues of genre only in the sense that existing technologies preclude a hard SF analysis.

avatar's) hell. It also echoes the poignant line from *The Handmaid's Tale* that “better never means better for everyone” (Atwood, 1985, p.211) and serves to focus discussions around artificial intelligence (AI) and posthumanism and the idea that consciousness might, at some future point, not be specific to humans.

By interrogating Dinello's idea of techno-heaven versus techno-hell, the central tropes associated with cyber fiction are embedded in *TGiA*. Similar to technodystopian fiction, cyber fiction is characterised by narratives that focus on “the dark side of the technological-fix visions of the future, with a wide range of post-human forms” (Featherstone et al., 1996, p.3). The plethora of work and sub-divisions within cyber fiction would require a thesis on its own, but the oeuvre—which grew up around the work of William Gibson, in which he originally coined the term cyberspace—encompasses narratives that examine human-machine augmentation, cyberspace and VR and comes replete with “utopian, dystopian and heterotopian possibilities” (Featherstone et al., 1996, p.1). And since *TGiA* brings cyberspace, VR, posthumanism, dystopia and heterotopia together, the case for *TGiA* as a near-future, speculative, techno-dystopian, cyber fiction—while a mouthful—is apt.⁹ Also pertinent is a common trope in dystopian (and cyber) fiction: the alienated outsider. It is the outsider's *point of view*, in fact, that is key to the utopian/dystopian narrative.

An observer living outside of the dystopia/utopia and on whom the tenets of the World State have no influence can afford to be dispassionate about it. Nevertheless, an outsider living in the utopia can perceive it as a dystopia. (Ionoaia, 2015, p.2)

In the next section I will argue that my protagonist (both as Lionel and Ludi) has all

⁹ The near future is a common choice for writers of dystopian fiction since it has no fixed time limit. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) was written in 1947-1948, for example, while *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) describes a society months or a few years away from the time it was written.

the characteristics of the outsider and, therefore, the *point of view* Ionoaia deems necessary to perceive utopia as dystopia from within.

An argument for Outsider Fiction

My protagonist, Lionel Byrd, is a mixed heritage, socially awkward loner, who, by virtue of his (unnamed) autism is unable to fully comprehend emotions or connect with other people. His isolation is compounded by liminal delusions and paranoia. At the time of writing I believed these characteristics were enough for the novel to be loosely categorised as outsider fiction. But the label is problematic since a definition is difficult to pin down and it is neither a distinct nor defined genre in itself.

The term first came to the fore in 1956 when Colin Wilson published his book *The Outsider*. Outsider fiction quickly became shorthand for any novel in which the protagonist happened to be neurotic or odd. But in its unspoilt first flush, the term marked the beginning of a new kind of literary analysis—of protagonists with a “sense of strangeness, of unreality” (Wilson, [1956] 1970, p.15) or further, of protagonists who stand for truth. As such, these protagonists are linked to the existential project and Wilson identifies Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864) as the “first major treatment of the Outsider theme in modern literature” and one which also stands as a “uniquely great monument of Existentialist thought” (Wilson, [1956] 1970, p.157).

Similarly, Arian Kirilloff identifies the character of the “existentialist hero-outsider” and how he “demands an examination of the basic emotional ‘stuff’ of life . . . which has to be lived as it is felt, rather than thought” (1974, p.128) The outsider, then, is a man “who cannot live in the comfortable, insulated world of the bourgeois”,

and cannot accept “what he sees and touches as reality”: a man who, in some sense, has “awakened to chaos” (Wilson, [1956] 1970, p.15).

Before I move onto a case for Lionel as existentialist hero-outsider I want to describe the outsider in literature himself—and it is invariably a he not a she. The outsider appears to have his origins in the picaresque narratives of Nashe and Voltaire although the motif of a stranger in a foreign land goes back to antiquity with Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Dead* (ca. 120–190 CE).¹⁰ David Duff describes the *picaro* of 17th century literature as a “tough outsider, who learns only the worldly wisdom needed for social adjustment and satiric observation” (2014, p.238). He is a lower class rogue, sans morals, set on adventure and the antithesis of the lovelorn heroes of pastoral romance.

Donna Dalnekoff focuses on the character of the “familiar stranger” and argues that the outsider appears in literature “in numerous guises, as a traveler from strange countries (...) in outer space and within the imagination” (1973, p.121). Additionally, Dalnekoff examines the work of relational sociologist Georg Simmel who defines the outsider as the “potential wanderer”: a man who “has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going” ([1908] 1950, p.402), while Robert Ezra Park talks about the “marginal man” condemned to live “at the same time in two worlds” (1928, pp.892-893).

These characters on the margins who inhabit two worlds, continue to manifest throughout the nineteenth century in the works of Dostoevsky and Hamsun, among others, and into the twentieth century via authors such as Hesse, Camus and Sartre—

¹⁰Lucian of Samasota (ca. 120–190 CE), lived in Athens and developed a peculiar brand of cynical wit. He is famed for the series of dialogues in which he satirises human folly, superstition and hypocrisy.

who each examined the experiences of men operating outwith the boundaries of the mainstream. Their protagonists represent, according to McFarlane, a break with the tradition of “socially orientated literature” and a shift in emphasis towards a literature that deals with the “ways of the mind” (1956, p.574).

Further, Colin Wilson argues that the outsider often expresses himself in Existentialist terms: “He is not very concerned with the distinction between body and spirit, or man and nature . . . For him the only important distinction is between being and nothingness” ([1956] 1970, p.27) even to the point of nihilism, so that sometimes these characters choose to withdraw from the world altogether—either to physically hide away (Lionel, certainly, has withdrawn to a place of digital safety) or because they believe they have, in some way, transcended society’s moral code. Other times they remain in the world but their inner experience is characterised by their separateness from it and so occasionally these characters display autistic traits; Meursault in *L’Étranger* (1942) for example. They may even be psychopathic, in the manner of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (1991). But every outsider, to some extent or other, is “not of this world” (Wilson, [1956] 1970, p.48) and certainly not the one they are inhabiting in the text.

Another branch of outsider fiction resides under the broader canopy of the post-colonial narrative. Written by immigrants and/or members of a given diaspora, these texts detail the protagonist’s experience of being a cultural and racial outsider in the host country and examine the alienation/disenfranchisement that ensues. In George Lamming’s collection of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) he uses Shakespeare’s enslaved monster, Caliban, as a metaphor for “otherness” and a symbol of the confrontation between colonizer and colonized. Similarly, Margaret Paul Joseph (1962) uses Caliban to connote both characters in, and authors of, West Indian

fiction. The “trauma of colonialism”, she argues, is implicit in the work of post-colonial writers and through their fiction they always “betray their own sense of Otherness” (Joseph, 1962, p.2). But as a white female author living in the UK I am uncomfortable contextualizing *TGiA* alongside migration narratives and other, post-colonial fiction. Nevertheless, I hoped I could convey a sense of Lionel’s alienation concerning the immigrant experience. Adopted from Kenya and mixed-heritage, Lionel does not seem able to fit in. His isolation has been compounded by the racial bullying he suffered at the hands of his brothers and even though he lives on multicultural Milk Street, the other Jamaicans call him “Redbone” (a derogatory term for a light-skinned black person) and he struggles to find solace in any community. But the description of his life begs another question about whether white/host writers can ever write from the perspective of black characters—a discussion I undertake in “Blurred Edges: Multicultural Fiction and the Role of the White Author” (Packer, 2015) where I examine Toni Morrison’s assertion that any attempt by a white writer to describe the black experience equates to wilful critical blindness (Morrison, 1994, p.14). My article concludes that while the white writer can never achieve authenticity in this respect, they can add to the story of an “evolving, plural society, even if the stories are sometimes uncomfortable or shameful” (Packer, 2015), and this was my hope for *TGiA*.

Therefore, while I am not entitled to claim *TGiA* as a migration narrative, Lionel Byrd’s character might still conform to Joseph’s notion of “Caliban the excluded” (1962, p.1) and express something of the exiled outsider’s experience. His autism (which I will examine in the next section) alienates him further and pushes him to the fringes of society. *TGiA* can thus be categorised as outsider fiction that grew out of the Existential project.

An argument for Existential Fiction

The concern of existentialism, according to Steven Earnshaw, is to ask the following questions: “who am I? what am I? what life shall I live? how shall I live it?” (2006, p.1). Existential narratives, therefore, are subject to the same uncertainties enshrined in techno-dystopian/posthuman fiction with explicit regard to interrogating the limits of human identity. Also, existential narratives are often apprehended through the character of the outsider who questions aspects of *being* and *how to be* as well as the difficulty, even the impossibility, of comprehending the “Other”.

It would appear, therefore, that *TGiA*'s credentials as existential fiction need little examination. Edith Kern (1968), however, identifies the creation of characters which are “Other” as the abiding dilemma for the oeuvre and which poses questions for *TGiA*. “The existential universe,” Kern argues, “is always that of one individual consciousness to whom the Other cannot but remain alien and opaque” (1968, p.329), the assertion being that the existential novel must always be a first-person narrative where the “I” is identical to the author—and while the *CoreQuest* sections conform to this requirement the third-person sections do not. More importantly, Lionel and his avatar, Ludi, are categorically not me.

Kierkegaard and Sartre sidestep this dilemma by regarding their fictional creatures as possible versions of themselves rather than Others. In doing so, Kierkegaard was able to “disclaim authorship for that part of his work he considered ‘aesthetic’ or ‘fictional’” (Kern, 1968, p.331), while Sartre made use of his concept of the “look” and the fictional “point of view” to circumnavigate the problem. Writing much later, Earnshaw takes a softer line, and argues that rather than knowing the Other, existentialist literature is more about a character’s “struggle for authenticity of

the self” (2006, p.118). This requires a character (not the writer) to focus on his own, unique possibilities for existence and allow himself to “be summoned out of . . . [his] lostness in the ‘they’” (Heidegger, [1927] 1962, p.345) — *they* being the everyday ways of being into which the individual has been subsumed. This is closer to an analysis that can be applied to *TGiA* and one that does not require Lionel, or any other characters in the novel, to be versions of the author’s “self”, only for them to embody their own struggles for authenticity. Therefore, in terms of the form overall, the Heideggerian search for authenticity need only dramatise the protagonist’s interiority and articulate the *they* from which he is finding a way back.

Still, Lionel’s digital manifestation as Ludi is similar to Kierkegaard’s strategy for disclaiming authorship using pseudonymity—or masks. Lionel “literally” makes a disguised version of himself. In real life he is a gangly, mixed-race geek. In *CoreQuest* he’s a white, blue-eyed “He-Man with chiselled biceps and sculpted calves” (Packer, 2012, p.24). He even hacks the servers of every MMORPG in order to play as Ludi, each time. Further, his self-actualisation in digital form has led him to catalogue footage and archive memories of Ludi in every game he’s played since childhood, while at the same time suffering amnesia regarding huge chunks of his corporeal life.

Lionel is not content to recreate himself, either. He develops versions of his significant others: Lilith, Crystal (the lost Chinese girl he sees on the street outside his flat) and his beloved cat, Buddha, are all reversioned in this way. At first, he simply wants Buddha to be “as authentic in 3D as he is in real life” (Packer, 2012, pp.60-61). But as the cat becomes increasingly unwell he aims to resurrect him in the digital world. “You’ll have another life” he tells Buddha. “A life so much better than this one” (Packer, 2012, p.108).

In Ludi, Lionel has created a fictional “possible” of himself in order to understand his experience of the world more fully. This is not the same as the fancy footwork Kierkegaard employs to sidestep the conundrum of the authorial “I”, since by Kern’s estimation the “I” should always be the author herself. Instead, *TGiA* offers Lionel as the “I” and Ludi and the others he programmes as the possible selves, allowing the novel to use different voices to represent versions of Lionel’s selfhood and identity and thus conform to Earnshaw’s notion of the fictive character’s—rather than the author’s—search for authenticity.

Ironically, Lionel’s attempts to gain control of an uncontrollable world cast him more as a representation of the Platonic rationalist, trying to make sense of irrational existence, whereas existential tropes endorse “modes of cognition that consider the indeterminacy of the world, rather than ... the false ideal of overcoming the world’s indeterminacy” (Tanzer, 2007, p.7). At the same time, Tanzer’s assertion reveals a conflict between existential thought and existential literature, i.e. the very fact of “setting it down” follows more Platonic ideals than existential ones. Nevertheless, it describes the arc of Lionel’s progress from rationalism to absurdity as the novel progresses, which at the outset begins with a rational almost mechanical approach to his life and his job. A computer programmer, a savant and compulsive editor of his own experience, Lionel feels as if he is a “fantastic machine” and “time is reduced to a series of problem-solution intervals” where he has “a straightforward, achievable purpose” (Packer, 2012, p.71). But by the end he has abandoned himself to the absurdity of existence, bringing him closer in some respects to a purer, existentialist position.

It’s worth noting another existential trope used in techno-dystopian fiction generally, and *TGiA* specifically: the Camusian/Proustian notion of palingenesis. In

philosophical terms, palingenesis is the idea that the individual can be reincarnated, as either a living thing or an inanimate object. The concept is synonymous with metempsychosis or transmigration of the soul, which Jon Kear (2007) explains is something that need not happen after death. Kear uses the example of Proust who, in his desire to block out creative distractions, constructed a “chamber of pure interiority” and became the room and the buildings he inhabited (2007, p.233), while Camus, according to Andy Martin (2008), floats away on the smoke of his own cigarette and dissolves into light.

He passes, suddenly, from being a “prisoner of the cave” to the status of free spirit, released from carnal being and poverty. (Martin, 2008, p.94).

Similarly, Lionel begins to merge with the digital realm: “If I could slide through hard surfaces,” he says, “become as spirit or gas . . . I would slip from this world into another. I will. I know I will one day” (Packer, 2012, p.201).

CoreQuest, therefore, can be apprehended in the manner of Proust’s bedroom: a “curious Cartesian space of sorts, a space of pure interiority . . . of unfettered sensation” (Kear, 2007, p.233). Andy Martin goes further and argues that by rising above corporeal constraints the existential protagonist can become God-like (2010, p.3), a state that existentialists achieve through a focus on the landscape of the mind rather than the body but which Lionel achieves through digital embodiment. Nevertheless, Lionel’s palingenesis offers the potential of becoming not only divine, but eternal and in this sense, existentialist writing—like techno-dystopian and posthuman fiction—espouses the notion that *being* need not be an exclusively flesh-and-blood experience.

What is clear at the beginning of the novel, however, is that Lionel *is* human, yet he does not process the world in a neurologically typical way. Whether this is due

to his autism or to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) emerges in the climactic end scenes. But at the outset Lionel's condition shadows the narrative and lends itself to an existentialist reading of the text. Lionel's autism, however, should not be read as shorthand for the existential outsider, and I am mindful of the ethics around representations of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). But my work with ASD students inspired and enriched the character of Lionel and led me to research aspects of the condition for the purposes of the novel.

Hence, Lionel is autistic in the clinical sense. He experiences an impairment in his ability to decode other people's emotions. Where neurologically typical people are able to ascribe mental states to others by interpreting visual cues—if someone is smiling/crying, they are happy/sad, and so on—autistic people like Lionel suffer what Simon Baron-Cohen (1997) describes as “mindblindness” or a breakdown in these unconscious decoding abilities. Anecdotally, sufferers describe their condition as having a “faulty wire” (Appendix II) and this metaphor typifies Lionel's understanding of others: “Crossed wires – they happen, especially when he's not sleeping properly and he's barely slept for weeks” (Packer, 2012, p.34). Lionel cannot make connections. He is confused by other people's actions, unable to work out what they want from him and so he avoids human contact and retreats into *CoreQuest*. He interacts with co-workers when he must, but he has no friends except Lilith and Buddha, his cat. Like Garcin in *Huis Clos* (Sartre, 1944), he embodies the maxim that “hell is other people”. But while Lionel's ASD dictates much of his behaviour it also reflects the wider existentialist notion that individuals cannot know one another, ever, regardless of whether or not they are neurologically typical.

Sartre, himself, admitted being predisposed to an autistic grasp of the world (Martin, 2008, p.110) and considered feelings as self-reflexive and egotistical. Love,

for example, is reduced to the desire to be loved and the other person, the beloved, is important only as the agent of love—nothing more. For Sartre, “love is a conflict,” says Childers, “a Hegelian struggle in which the lover desires to possess the beloved in order to establish his own ... freedom” (2013, p.394). There is no two-way street! This, the reader discovers, is the same for Lionel and is particularly evident in his relationship with Lilith, where he appears to be enjoying the benefits of familial love but where the reality is much more sinister, since it turns out that Lilith does not exist at all. Thus, she is an agent of love (in Sartrean terms) and at the same time, a delusion.

Lionel Byrd, therefore, is an individual in search of himself, but his ASD and trauma-induced delusions mean he can never comprehend the “Other”. Instead, he reverts to other people and augments himself within the Cartesian space of the MMORPG in an attempt to make sense of life, death, grief—and other people. Thus, in both human and posthuman fashion, *TGiA* explores those same existential questions Earnshaw posed: “who am I? what am I? what life shall I live? how shall I live it?” (2006, p.1)

While the weight of evidence is against *TGiA* as outsider fiction in the mode of migration/diasporic narratives, the work aligns with most other definitions of outsider and existential fiction with respect to Wilson’s analysis of the “man outside” with his “sense of strangeness” and “unreality” and his focus on interiority ([1956] 1970, p.15). Lionel’s attempts to know the Other are futile. His experiments in self-knowledge are ultimately more successful but it is only in abandoning himself to absurdity and the possibility of a digital eternity that he achieves something like understanding.

Lionel's apotheosis comes late in the novel. He has already uploaded his reprogrammed "essence" to *CoreQuest* when he rescues Crystal, the "Animé girl", from the slave master. But despite his heroism, he has failed to overcome the traumatic loss of his sister. In the penultimate chapter—The Send Off—he jumps from the cattle bridge where she died, apparently to his own death. But in the final chapter it seems his "essence" persists in the game and this cements the intersection of *TGiA*'s existential, posthuman and cyber fiction paradigms, all of which examine the limits of identity and/or the human body through "direct brain-computer interfaces [which] . . . transform the supposed 'essence' of humanity, 'our' minds or souls" (Foster, 2005, p.xi). Further, Devanny's (2014) analysis of the novel as part of the speculative, posthuman literary phenomenon where the self is seen as separate from corporeal embodiment attests to its cyber fiction and, in some respects, existentialist credentials.

But it is the techno-dystopian vision that has the most depth, both thematically and conceptually. Lionel's is a society in decline. Humans have largely abandoned the corporeal world for the realms of the digital. Society is eroding into techno-dystopia. The MMORPG where Lionel manifests as Ludi is a dystopic mirror of the real world but here, at least, his avatar can self-actualise and Ludi has a purpose where Lionel has none. And so the three loose attributions (dystopian, outsider and existential fiction) that I made at the outset come full circle. Dystopian fiction often relies on the character of the outsider and the character of the outsider relies on being estranged from the society that is commentated on. While none of the three attributions either include or preclude the others, they are inextricably linked in *TGiA* and the work draws on and engages with the tropes and forms of all three genres and their sub-

genres—near-future, speculative and cyber fiction, in order to explore questions of identity and alienation in our contemporary world.

Chapter 2: Issues of Time, Space and Language

Utopia, etymologically speaking u-topos, non-place, the place that doesn't exist, includes in a broad sense in literature what could be called u-chronia, time that doesn't exist. Within this duality there is room for u-glossia, a language that doesn't exist. (Yaguello, 2001, p.1)

While it's true that in general "the literary imagination refuses to conform to the familiar topology of everyday life" (Gomel, 2014, p.3) there is a danger with speculative and techno-dystopian fiction that its near-future settings and themes might dis-locate the reader. It was important, therefore, that *TGiA* observed Heinlein's instruction to offer a sense of place "possible to the universe as we know it" (1989, p.49), or more precisely follow Bachelard's suggestion to focus on "the sorts of space[s] that may be grasped" (1994, p.xxxi). However, Gomel also points out that many of us are familiar with this dis-location since our "everyday experience is defined . . . by the simultaneity, semantic propinquity, and instant accessibility of cyberspace" (2014, p.5). That is to say that our relationship with technology has forever changed our relationship with space and further, our apprehension of narrative.

It is with this understanding that I developed the settings in *TGiA* and situated the action in the near-future and in the MMORPG, *CoreQuest*. Both are fictive projections, but one is represented as *real* space that conforms to *real* time (albeit a fictional near-future), and the other is a *virtual* place, or non-place, and hence unbound by all normal, spatio-temporal rules. There is another space, invoked in the short @GameAddict sections where an authorial voice—an omnipotent "I", if you will, scrutinises various themes in the narrative and exposes the fictive environment and thematic thrust of the novel itself.

In this chapter I will examine the intersection of all these spaces, their relationship in time and how they are expressed and delineated through language and make a case for the novel's distinctiveness *vis-a-vis* its use of standard English, gamer speak and a stylised form using compound words and neologisms to delineate the time and space in the novel.

Space and Time

Writers are “hungry for place as expressively potent, place as experience ... as a trigger to memory, imagination, and mythic presence” (Sinclair, 2003, p.101). I will add that the reader is also hungry for place to exemplify these functions, and while setting is important in almost all creative fiction, specific genres of fiction are more spatially aware than others. Cyberpunk, for example, is strongly related to urban infrastructure and its effect on social dynamics. Fantasy fiction is often accompanied by detailed maps and diagrams.¹¹ But the key point for *TGiA* was that the elision of fictive space and time was articulated in a way that would locate the reader, not only geographically—but conceptually and politically.

The reader's apprehension of fictive time is defined by Ricoeur as the “temporal aspect of this virtual experience of being-in-the-world proposed by the text” (1985, p.100). The writer, however, is primarily concerned with suspending the reader's disbelief and Tara Collington cites Ricoeur's (1984) notion of “three-fold mimesis” as underpinning the reader's understanding of time in a novel and thus facilitating temporal and spatial verisimilitude (2001, p.230).

Three-fold mimesis involves the following stages:

¹¹ In development, *TGiA* not only included maps of Lionel's neighbourhood but also each realm of *CoreQuest*.

A reference back to the familiar pre-understanding we have of the order of action; an entry into the realm of poetic composition; and finally a new configuration by means of this poetic refiguring of the pre-understood order of action. (Ricoeur, 1984, p.xi)

This deconstruction and reconstruction of the virtual world of the text based on experiential knowledge further recalls Bakhtin's (1981) idea of the literary chronotope (literally, timespace) which, Collington defines as, "the intrinsic interconnectedness of time and space in literature, as well as the way in which specific temporo-spatial patterns characterize certain generic types" (2001, p.221).

In order to anchor what Ricoeur calls the reader's "fictive experience" of timespace, Bakhtin emphasises the motifs that position the reader in the text, in history and ultimately in genre. These motifs are invariably spatial—a road or a river, for example—but they have different significance depending on when they are set and further, where and when they are apprehended i.e. the era and the place the reader is inhabiting. Thus, it is the way that time and socio-geographical elements intersect with the motifs of a text that underpin its peculiar chronotopic significance.

The real world scenes in *TGiA*, for example, focus principally on Lionel's flat and his workplace. But the action is also located in a series of public spaces, which Oldenburg (1982) has called "third spaces" and which are distinct from the first place (home) and the second place (work). Third places include churches, clubs, parks and libraries and in *TGiA* are represented by the local park with its "prim borders" and "regimented beds", and the "dilapidated" care home where Lionel's father is ensconced. There are scenes on trains, on railway platforms, in nightclubs and in public toilets and the way each setting is described reflects the recognizable "now" and also ideas around authoritarian oppression and societal entropy. For example, in Mr Barber's shop—Gentleman's Choice—race and embodiment are foregrounded.

The shop is a remnant of an old world and of Lionel's childhood and it is the only place where he feels accepted. His adoptive father took him there when he was young and it's where men, like him, still meet and discuss the issues of the day. There is a 3D TV in the shop but Mr Barber has lost the remote control and has never mastered the voice commands and so this is a place where technology has been misplaced or side-lined and where men reach out and touch things, and where they must be touched if only to get their hair cut: an analogue place, which is juxtaposed with the more technological places represented in the real world sections.

Another rationale here, was to draw on concepts espoused by Guy Debord and the Situationists relating to psychogeography.¹² The central idea of psychogeography is that we navigate environments using esoteric reference points rather than maps, and that geographical realities impact our demeanour and socio-psychological health. For example, Lionel feels "safe" in the familiar surroundings of Mr Barber's shop and enjoys "the old Jamaican's companionship" (Packer, 2012, p.19) whereas, he can barely endure the "tortuous . . . proximity" (2012, p.69) to other humans he experiences on public transport. At Meddingley, his workplace, he avoids almost all human contact (Packer, 2012, p.80) and here motifs such as surveillance mechanisms and 'magic eyes' etc. (2012, p.79) further establish the uneasy juxtaposition of old analogue versus new digital worlds. The abiding impetus, whether via chronotopic or psychogeographical means, was to locate the reader in recognisable domestic and urban tableaux which would support the techno-dystopian vision of the near-future and provide a complex counterpoint to the fantastical, virtual sections.

¹² Psychogeography as defined by Ernest Guy Debord (1955) is "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."

Novels, like *TGiA*, that depict virtual worlds must necessarily describe places that transcend time and space. These spaces are characterised not by bricks or concrete but by “flows of information, flows of technology . . . flows of images, sounds and symbols” (Castells, 2000, p.423). The writer, then, is tasked with coaxing something palpable out of something intangible and in this respect, Marie-Laure Ryan recognises affinities between VEs and literature, since the novel itself is an intangible space; an example of a “non-actual possible world” (1999, p.115) which allows the reader to “transcend the boundaries of human perception” (1999, p.119).

Additionally, there are a number of recent novels that situate all or some of the action in a digital game environment. Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), Card’s *Ender’s Game* (1985), Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992) and Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011) all belong in this category and Megan Condis (2016) identifies these as speculative, ludic narratives. Ludic novels, she says, are “bursting with intertextual references [and] in-jokes aimed at gaming culture aficionados” which also enshrine “cultural codes” that define “heteronormative white masculinity” (2016, p.2). Fortunately, *TGiA* with its mixed-heritage protagonist eschews this last classification, and while I accept Condis’s critical analysis of Cline, *Ready Player One* still manages to invoke an entire era (the 1980s) and thereby locates its readership by drawing on motifs from the decade, specifically its gaming sub-culture.

TGiA, too, uses ludic motifs. Lionel’s avatar is called Ludi. *CoreQuest* is described as existing on the “game layer”, there are many “dimensions” divided into “realms” where avatars must progress through the “levels”. Also, like *Ready Player One*, the novel’s timespace summons existing sub-cultural knowledge that allows the reader to reconfigure a “pre-understood order of action” (Ricoeur, 1984, p.xi) which,

in this instance, is peculiar to computer games but which also defines a generation—specifically Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980).

The places represented within online games are not, of course, actual places, i.e. they do not exist in the physical world, but by virtue of their cultural significance they conceptually anchor the reader in time and space. Charles Soukup even suggests that VEs with their “chat rooms” and “multi-user environments” perform the same function as Oldenburg’s third places and are digital versions of a “Norman Rockwell-esque small town where citizens gather in cafes and barber shops to talk about local politics and share communal stories” (2006, p.422). *CoreQuest* performs an analogous function for Lionel, and here there are parallels with Foucault’s notion of heterotopia, a “place without a place” where “all the real arrangements . . . found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned” ([1967] 1997, p.333). Sherman Young, who in turn echoes the work of MacKenzie Wark (1994), maintains that it’s a “relatively straightforward task to map . . . cyberspace as a heterotopia” since the digital realm has become the place where the tricky transactions of sex and death are enacted away from quotidian experience, and where the arrangements of society are “represented, challenged, and overturned” (1998, p.1). Lionel—nervous and almost celibate in real life, for example, barely blinks when, as Ludi, he is seduced by Mata Angelica in *CoreQuest* (Packer, 2012, pp.122-123). Similarly, Lionel displays dissociative behavior at his father’s funeral, but has a touching and emotional reaction as Ludi when his companion, Dan-Albwrhan, is killed by the WeirdFucks (Packer, 2012, p.231). Nevertheless, *CoreQuest* is notable for its complex representations of psycho-social space and this highlights Young’s assertion that while cyberspace can be apprehended as a heterotopia, there

exist within it further heterotopias as well as dystopian and utopian possibilities (1998, p.2).

TGiA, therefore, offers ludic, technological, analogue/old-world, dystopian and utopian motifs to pinpoint its chronotopic “location”. Elena Gomel, however, focusses on time and the political dimensionality of creative fiction. The post-modern assault on chronology, she argues, has meant time has been subsumed by space, in art as well as science (2010, pp.13-14). Indeed, even before cyberspace, Foucault declared we were “in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered” ([1967] 1997, p.330), and Gomel cites his (and others) endeavours to substitute time-based concepts such as “continuity, causality, and temporal progression” with spatial categories such as “discontinuity ... threshold, rupture and transformation” (2010, p.14).

Nowhere is the illusion of time, and modern society’s transcendence of it, more clearly illustrated than by cyberspace—a u-topos by definition. Certainly Fredric Jameson believes that in terms of language at least, we “now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic” (1991, p.16) and in a later text, Jameson adds that “the distinctiveness of SF as a genre has less to do with time (history, past, future) than with space” (2005, pp.312–313). In *TGiA*, the notion of synchronic simultaneity is clearly expressed in the @GameAddict sections which refer again and again to discontinuities of space and time, and further, the impact they have on human relationships and identity.

@GameAddict (#23756745): 20:6:27
You’re a puppeteer – but the strings you’re pulling
are coiled round the globe. Lift your sword
in London and someone bows to your blade in
Taiwan. It’s magic. Ordinary people, like you,
in control of a Realm. You can hear players
talking from Timbuktu to Jerusalem – a babel of
voices. You can’t see it, but the Game Layer is

everywhere. (Packer, 2012, p.157)

@GameAddict (#23756745): 12:6:27

Who are you playing? That's the question. It could be the King of England. It could be a road sweeper from Tokyo. It could be a little old lady on a bus in the Andes, tapping away on her Google. It could be your boss or your minion. It's democracy, that's what it is. You might have had sex with the President, no less – or with someone you're sitting next to on the train. You could have shared victories, despair or intimate moments and there you are scanning your ereaders, trying not make eye contact – unaware that your avatars could be in love – or close combat. (Packer, 2012, p.137)

Here, a disembodied voice addresses the reader concerning issues distinct from, yet related to, those in the wider story. This serves to foreground the political world of the text and at the same time critique aspects of contemporary society. While the dominance of space is incontrovertible in these quotations, time is of the essence, since they hint at a temporal trajectory that begins now and ends in a dystopian future. For Gomel, too, the importance of time must not be overlooked. She offers the concept of *timeshapes* as a way to pinpoint a precise political and cultural moment in fiction, rather than an exclusively historical one. Timeshapes are things “between public and private, between memory and history” (Gomel, 2010, p.3) which, like Dawkins’s memes (1976) or Jameson's ideologemes (1981), are “the “smallest possible unit[s]” of ideologically charged meaning” (Gomel, 2010, p.3). For example, using the @GameAddict quotations from *TGIA* above, the text combines technological motifs (hashtags, @signs, ereaders and Googles) with old world artefacts (swords and puppets) and a litany, almost, of political structures from democracy and republics to monarchies, alongside place names that suggest both old and new worlds (London, Taiwan, Timbuktu, Jerusalem etc.). The text, although

futuristic, is freighted with what James Wood describes as the “almost inaudible rustle of historical association clinging to the hems of modern words” (2008, p.99), and achieves what Gomel calls “a quantum snapshot of the multiple timeshapes of postmodernity” (2010, p.xi). Thus, *TGiA*, offers a chronotope peculiar to speculative fiction, and through its meticulous political depictions of real and virtual spaces also presents the reader with a specific timeshape which is delivered through the language of history, race, religion and subversion.

Language

Perhaps the most noteworthy device in *TGiA* is the use of a heavily stylised language to articulate the non-physical world of *CoreQuest*. These chapters alternate with those set in the physical world, written in standard English. Code-switching between the two forms distinguishes the novel from similar ludic and speculative narratives, which tend to remain in one space-frame and/or use one linguistic style. Of course, a great many authors have experimented with language to articulate their fictive worlds—future or otherwise—and many others have situated the action in a VE. But few have used different linguistic forms to differentiate spaces as opposed to species or cultures in the same timeframe. Still, as Yaguello suggests in this chapter’s opening quotation—where there is a u-topos you might also find a u-glossia, and since *CoreQuest* is a virtual place and therefore a u-topos, a u-glossia seemed apposite. Further, a u-glossia would serve to emphasise the tricky relationship between the physical and non-physical spaces and so probe the nature of *realness* and the palpability of the imaginary.

Stockwell argues that creative language *per se* delineates the real world from the world of the imaginary and even naturalistic texts must depart from hard reality in

order to function. “Dickens’ ‘London’,” he says, “is not our London; Philip Pullman’s ‘Oxfords’ are explicitly not our Oxford” (2006, p.3). But there exists a spectrum of linguistic inventiveness with creative language at one end and More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Tolkien’s numerous neographies (synthetic writing systems) at the other. But Stockwell questions whether a fully worked neography is necessary in creative fiction since its construction goes way “beyond ... artistic purpose” (2006, p.8). Certainly, if we transpose ‘place’ onto the spectrum of inventiveness then standard English is *in* this world while a neography is *out* of this world, and a fully-worked neography represents a world too far for the casual reader. Therefore, the precise location of *CoreQuest*’s language needed careful thought.

Bearing this in mind, a number of linguistic forms—some simple, others more complex—were considered for the virtual sections. Video gamers, for example, often use non-standard grammar and vocabulary. The resulting languages are ephemeral forms that evolve between handfuls of people. Nevertheless, they exemplify the energy I hoped to emulate in *TGiA*. The conversation, below, is between players on social media (see Appendix III for screenshots).

Eve: I just DESTROYED Branka. And the Bloodmother. Those bitches were HARD. CORE. I just got Morrigan and wacked their asses with a blizzard then got Oghren all over that shit with his axe. Oh yeah. Got it in the first try. Are you proud of me?

Joëlle: Pride doesn't cover it. I'm GLEAMING. Love. Dragon age showdown on the 18th. We're gonna finish my x-box run and get ready for Awakenings. You fuckin KNOWS it Xxx

Eve: AHA! Hell to the yeah. Apparently I can't marry Alistair because I'm an elf. HOW MUCH DOES THAT SUCK?! I totally forgot to harden him (aha!) when I did his personal quest. Gay gay gay. His approval rating of me is at 100, and I totally tapped that.
(Facebook, 2011)

The odd grammar, auto-capitalisation and the fact that some words (but not all) are used in a non-standard way, derive from the well-documented world of gamer speak.

Carooso (2004) explains that these forms utilise Leet Speak (written 1337 5p34k), the symbol-rich construction devised by the hacking community (outlined in the introduction). Internet artist, Mez Breeze, developed her signature mezangelle¹³ along similar lines and she incorporates some code—mainly ASCII¹⁴ and mark-up—mixed with English words to deliver a language that probes the relationship between human and machine. Her poem, *Twitterwurking*, typifies the construction (see Appendix IV for full transcript).

- Twitterwurking Transcript -

```
1 : goTo [to + Doro.thee + Wicked. Whi(t{e})ches(s)].  
do[p]wn.the.ra[bbitten].hole.we.go || twitter_set[tlers,all].  
2. shiver[me.tym(paanies)burrs]ing.st[l]one arms t.witching granite  
blo.od [d?]. r[sh]iver.me +t[oxic]all[Ice].tale.u = . . .  
(Breeze, 2008)
```

Here, the symbol-heavy syntax works as a cypher, which necessitates the reader to decode in order to comprehend. This underlines an important (but auxiliary) question about the extent to which the author should consider the experience of her readers. Stockwell proposes dialectical extrapolation as the way forward: “More extensive than neologistic innovation but falling short of a full invented language” dialectical extrapolation allows the writer to give texture to her projected world “while not making undue demands on the reader to engage in detailed decoding” (2006, p.5) and since *TGiA* was intended to localise rather than alienate, it made sense to situate the language of *CoreQuest* at the stylistic end of the spectrum. Thus, while mezangelle, with its posthuman leanings, inspired the stylised sections up to a point, it was the

¹³ Mezangelle is often called ‘code poetry’ and employs elements of programming syntax such as deep bracketing and file structures coupled with natural language.

¹⁴ ASCII is an abbreviation of American Standard Code for Information Interchange. ASCII code is the numerical representation of characters in computers and other devices.

dialectical extrapolated gamer speak form, or gamer patois if you will, that underpinned the language of *CoreQuest*.

Nevertheless, considering the necessity to decode any stylised language that goes beyond the simply poetic, the rationale for its use must be that it performs, Stockwell suggests, at least one of three functions. The first is elaborative, i.e. the language affords “an ornamental richness to the imagined landscape”. Second, it performs an indexical function whereby readers can “determine the degree of accessibility between their own world and the imaginary world”. (For example, Hergé’s Tintin stories feature a language called Syldavian—a conflation of Dutch and German—which serves to codify a character’s foreign-ness without saying anything specific about nationality but which still draws upon important “geopolitical discourses of the twentieth century” (Dunnett, 2009, p.583)¹⁵ Finally, the invented language has an “emblematic function” which goes beyond place, i.e. the language itself represents a transcendent or “thematically important idea”.

Newspeak, Utopian, Marain and Brian Aldiss’s psychedelic language are all thematically important carriers of the political polemic, comment, or satire of the works in which they feature.
(Stockwell, 2006, p.8)¹⁶

Using Stockwell’s referents, the rationale for and function of the language in *CoreQuest* conforms to all three as follows: it is elaborative since it embellishes the

¹⁵ “Hergé’s approach ... combines an iconic protagonist with detailed and textured environments.” (Dunnett, 2009)

¹⁶ Newspeak is the fictional language described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (1949). Utopian is the fictional language of Thomas More’s (1516) novel, *Utopia*. The language was developed by More (and some say by his friend, Peter Giles). It has a 22-symbol alphabet based on geometric shapes—the triangle, circle and square. Marain is the language of The Culture, a fictional, interstellar society described in the series of novels that bears the same name by Iain M. Banks (1987-2012). Marain was designed by The Culture to exploit the Sapir-Whorf hypotheses i.e. the idea that language can influence thoughts. *Barefoot in the Head* (Aldiss, 1969) is an ambitious, psychedelic, SF novel-experiment that explores narcotics, language and stream of consciousness.

authenticity of the imagined landscape. It is indexical in the way it simultaneously creates distance and proximity between the reader's world and the imagined world (i.e. it delineates physical and non-physical space), and it is emblematic in the sense that it expresses the socio-political themes associated with techno-dystopianism.

For example, in the following quotation, Ludi learns the back-story about a character called Mata Angelica, an Eroticon (sex worker), who rescues him in

CoreQuest: Level 1.

Mata Angelica was created for FantasyV, a pleasure dimension, where every imagining and proclivity was catered for, even to the Last Taboos. FantasyV was deleted after Wonderlanders were discovered using Lovematch Messenger to communicate with minors in multi-dimensions. This was prohibited . . . The Eroticons, PornQueens and RentArthurs from FantasyV were mostly made Void. Their Creators should've been rapped for it but they were living it bigstyle somewhere called Baltik. The ones that suffered were rank-and-file characters looking for love or using their flesh-gifts for credit. The Dot-Triple-X bubble finally burst. But Mata Angelica's Creator salvaged her code and smuggled her to The Realm where she carved a niche offering unusual extras. She did things that GrindSirens weren't programmed to do, so naturally, she had licence to stay. (Packer, 2012, p.103)

Here, the elaborative language succeeds precisely because the words are familiar.

There are no neologisms, for example, but a plethora of what Stockwell coins neosemes—the deployment of real words and compound forms to represent something new:

A 'flying saucer' and a 'black hole', strictly speaking, should be regarded as neosemes rather than neologisms. Neosemes have the advantage in literary fiction of making the imagined world seem close and more nearly extrapolated from the reader's familiar world. Neologisms, by contrast, can seem relatively disjunctive and alien. (2000, p.5)

Hence, references to places/dimensions are recognisable, if multi-layered. Fantasy V, Baltik and Void represent variously, a deprecated¹⁷ gamespace, an actual place in the real world and deletion or death. This paragraph also nods to ideas that readers with an interest in gaming/computing or online pornography and internet crime, will understand. As such they are indexical, since they mirror aspects of sex work and sex crime in the real world (and our current anxieties about policing sex crime online).

The language also provides the “intertextual references” that Condis (2016) alludes to in her essay, which serve to make the imaginary world more accessible. For example, the word “Wonderlanders” is a reference to an online paedophile ring, The Wonderland Club, which was eventually uncovered in 1998. Additionally, “Dot-Triple-X” represents the current .xxx voluntary top-level domain suffix for sites serving pornographic content, while RentArthurs and PornQueens are sex workers, like the GrindSirens: a word which itself is a conflation of grinding—a term gamers use when their character must perform menial tasks in an MMORPG—and sirens—the mythical creatures that lured sailors to their deaths and which more recently has come to denote any dangerous and/or seductive woman.

In real life, grinding for money or gold farming¹⁸ was banned by most platforms as it exploited gamers in developing countries. But note the parallel: Grinders, the pre-programmed characters in *CoreQuest* who eventually rise up, also represent the exploited classes. The point is that many of the invented/compound words in the game sections are allusions to places and ideas in contemporary culture

¹⁷ In computer terminology, deprecated is the word used to mean software or code that is no longer fully supported. In a sense it means decommissioned – but not quite since the code is still usable.

¹⁸ Gold farming is the practice of acquiring in-game currency through grinding in a MMORPG and selling the virtual currency for cash. Most often gold farmers are people in developing countries. “Gold farming is part of a dynamic that has eroded the real/virtual dichotomy. At the least, gold farming and trading represents the intersection and blurring of the real and the virtual.” (Heeks, 2009)

which serve to highlight associated socio-political issues and as such perform an emblematic function in the text.

Hence, the stylised form used in *CoreQuest* conforms to all three of Stockwell's referents and deserves its inclusion as a device in the novel. The minutiae of the form I developed would take too long to deconstruct here but it's worth highlighting an important aspect: namely *TGiA*'s mixture of technical language mixed with language that harks back to ancient times to express the non-physical space of *CoreQuest*. There, characters have visors and energy meters, for example, but they also ride "nag-prancers" or are conveyed on "palanquins" and sleep in rough "cots". Hence, the language achieves what Peter Boxall oxymoronically describes as being "gravid with the ancient future" (2013, p.223) and he cites *Cloud Atlas* (2004), among other works, as employing this particular device as a way of emphasising techno-dystopian concepts.

In *Cloud Atlas* the narrative progresses, generically and temporally, from 1870 to a dystopian future some 500 years hence, and back again. The language in the novel's middle section is an imagined, post-apocalyptic English: a kind of pidgin, that locates the reader geographically, in Hawaii, and temporally in a savage and distant future. The prose is neoseme-rich, like *TGiA*'s, and notably, the vocabulary mixes the primitive with the technological. For example, Mitchell's narrator, Zachry, progresses "on miry roads with busted cart-axle" (2004, p.249) in a land where "Goat tongue is a gift" (2004, p.252) but where technology or "smart" still resides in the hands of the "Prescients" (2004, p.258). This juxtaposition, I would argue, underpins the emblematic function of Mitchell's stylised sections: i.e. techno-hell will eventually lead to the primitivisation of humanity.

The language in *Cloud Atlas* resembles Russell Hoban's post-cataclysmic masterpiece, *Riddley Walker*, which also locates the reader in a far-flung future and captures "the spear and bow culture of a primitive society" (Clarke, 1993, p.208):

Hoban maintains a rigorous control of his language so that he can establish the social geography of his future Inland. Elementary spelling, primitive punctuation, folk etymologies, a simple and often crude vocabulary- these sketch the psychic background of the future people. (Clarke, 1993, pp. 209-10)

Myth, too, is used by both Mitchell and Hoban to illustrate the degradation of historical facts over time as well as allowing the reader (as I said earlier) to look "beneath the empiric surface" of their subjective reality (Suvin, 1972, p.375). The protagonists in both cases reside in a convulsive post-apocalyptic future. They are descendants of the '1 big 1' (in Riddley's case) and the 'fall' (in Zachry's) and in the struggle to decipher the truth of their past, they mythologise their cataclysmic histories. War stories are conflated with half-corrupted legends and the language, rather than being futuristic, resembles middle English and feels dis-placed and de-contextualised.

Similarly, Ludi finds himself in a dimension whose history is shrouded in myth.

... if you access the archive you'll find the files that explain the structure and chronology . . . First the historicals. Long ago, when the Creators said 'Let there be wicked graphics' and so forth, the Realm had been lush-green and gorgeous . . . But the Realm came corrupted. The oceans dried up or came poison and one vast desert grew between four tribal regions. (Packer, 2012, p.29)

There's a Biblical reference here and there (as there are in Hoban and Mitchell's work) as well as the suggestion of an archive which like the "saggy'n'wormy" books in *Cloud Atlas* (p.257) may, or may not, provide a truthful account of the past. But more importantly, in all three novels the use of archaic motifs, myth and familiar

stories connote societies unsure of their history and in *TGiA* this serves to exacerbate the time and placelessness that underpins Lionel's existential angst and also reflects post-modernity's rejection, or at least suspicion, of chronology.

For Yaguello, it is the function of invented language to articulate time *and* place: "Languages exist in some kind of space, that of the known world, but equally, when the imaginary intervenes, that of the unknown and invisible world. Languages exist in time, in historical time, but equally in mythical, Utopian time" (2012, p.6). But whether time or place is in the ascendant both Stockwell and Yaguello underline the virtual nature of a novel's timespace and the articulation of that timespace through language. The timespaces of *TGiA*, therefore, are not only delineated from one another using stylised language, but by using vocabulary that is at once ancient and technological. Hence a complex union and demarcation of time and space is achieved which locates the reader in the place and on the timeline of the physical and non-physical world's techno-dystopian chronology. The non-physical section, with its heavily stylised, neoseme-rich form, romanticises the archaic whilst expressing virtual embodiment and aligned, posthuman concepts. Therefore, *TGiA* not only orientates the reader by consciously delimiting the spaces of the novel using dialectical extrapolation (Stockwell, 2006) but by articulating the transitions between the fictive real and the fictive virtual and probing the realness of the virtual and even the intrinsic problem with articulating anything real using fiction.

Conclusion

The creative impetus for writing *TGiA* was not predicated on genre or clever delineations of time, space and language in post-modern science fiction. It came out of a desire to describe anxieties around our imminent departure from corporeality, both in terms of our mortality, but also as the unintended consequences of our reliance on ubiquitous technology such as the potential for disembodiment and loneliness, for example. The relentless solipsism of social and virtual media means it's not too great a leap to imagine being subsumed into the digital worlds in which we are, increasingly, opting to dwell. The novel, therefore, voices these anxieties whilst also offering hope—or perhaps offering something other than religion in the idea that in embracing virtual posthumanism we might achieve a form of eternal life. Data, after all, cannot die, or at least it is infinitely replicable.

TGiA, therefore, obstinately interrogates Dinello's (2005) techno-heaven/techno-hell dichotomy and although the novel offers a version of Geoghegan's (2013) "gloomy optimism" its techno-dystopian vision works both thematically and conceptually, since it aligns with Claeys' (2013) apprehension of the dystopian universe as fundamentally socio-political. Nevertheless, the other two loose genre attributions I made in chapter one—of outsider and existential fiction—still have merit when describing the nature of my protagonist. Dystopian fiction (techno or otherwise) relies on the point of view of the outsider who, in craving release from his wretchedness, "tends to express himself in Existentialist terms" (Wilson, [1956] 1970, p.27). Lionel's credentials as existential-hero-outsider, then, are firmly cemented.

TGiA, therefore, engages with the tropes and forms associated with outsider and existential fiction to explore contemporary questions of identity and alienation. But it is the extrapolation of the techno-dystopian label using other, ludic tropes that is of most interest.

Sci-Fi Now magazine called *TGiA* “post-cyberpunk” and this aligns with Devanny’s (2014) assessment of *TGiA* as part of an emerging posthuman literary form, which questions how technology might produce new models of human identity and so prophesy or at least anticipate how the human subject might present in our near future. Hence, *TGiA* with its ludic, speculative and posthuman credentials and its elision of dystopian, existential and outsider tropes represents a significant contribution to existing and emerging literary oeuvres.

TGiA achieves much of its significance through its meticulous demarcation of time and space in the text. It presents the reader with depictions of physical and non-physical spaces that are culturally and politically dense and which can be successfully assessed using Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of the literary chronotope and Gomel’s (2010) concept of timeshape since the language is freighted with motifs which locate the work, not only in a tantalizingly near future but at a cultural, political and historical moment that can also be understood to transcend time. SF narratives, as Gomel points out, tend to dispense with traditional chronology, although she argues that rather than doing away with time “we have been conditioned to squeeze time and space into narrow conceptual frames” (2010, p.3) through the unmitigated, and in her opinion, erroneous assaults of post-modernity.

It was my intention, however, that in writing *TGiA* I could represent the issues of time and space that virtuality brings. Further, I intended to comment on the virtual space of the novel itself whilst also imbuing the narrative with something like urgency (an inherently time-based concept) considering our burgeoning reliance on technology. Hence, the short @GameAddict sections serve to link the traditionally chronological world to the simultaneity of cyberspace where “the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered” (Foucault, [1967] 1997, p.330) co-exist timelessly.

The novel, therefore, asks the following questions: Where, precisely, are we when we are in a VE? How does time work there? Does “realness” reside in the corporeal body or in the conscious adventures of the virtual imagination? And so ideas around Foucault’s (1967) notion of heterotopia which “can juxtapose several contradictory spaces in a single real place” (Young, 1998, p.2) and therefore offer a complex array of dystopian and utopian possibilities at the same time, are enshrined in the text. This, too, is mirrored in the real world sections as the settings and motifs examine embodiment, digital transmigration and posthumanism and a specific timeshape is delivered through the language of history, race, religion and subversion.

Concerning the stylised language utilised in the CoreQuest sections, I will return to an anecdote from the introduction: in my youth, a Pentecostal girl invited me to attend a meeting where I witnessed people speaking in tongues—or glossolalia. The utterances they made were not real language; they had speech-like sounds but with no obvious grammar or structure. However, the language defined the people who spoke it. It was their *thing*. They didn’t do it in any old place either—they fell to tongues in their ‘holy’ spaces and when they were with their people. The point I intended to make by using this language was one of Utopian actualization, or how imagined or desired worlds become real. This is done by delineating space, not only by defining the limbic/spatial boundaries of the world but also the linguistic boundaries of a space, whether that space operates within a nation state or a tribe or religion or clique or even a heterotopia.

While a number of speculative narratives address the idea of posthumanism and AIs, and ludic narratives explore the reality of the virtual they tend to be written in standard or non-standard English throughout. But *TGiA* defines real and virtual spaces using shifts, back and forth, between standard and non-standard English and as such has met the temporal/spatial achievements of other near future fictions in a unique and multi-faceted way.

Appendices

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Appendix I Reviews of *The Game is Altered*

This is a smart, ultra-contemporary and ultimately deeply questioning novel-cum-thriller about where we are going with our identities, faced as we are with the diversions and unreality of the online world. The near future has never looked so vivid.

Henry Sutton, *Daily Mirror*

The novel is ... excellent on grief ... Here, the writing is at its most subtle ... Packer shows us Lionel's vulnerability and his impotent efforts to stave off the inevitable pain of loss.

Jenn Ashworth, *The Guardian*

The Game Is Altered is a beautiful, energetically written collection of fiercely contemporary ideas, neatly packaged like an MTV indent into a post-cyberpunk soap opera of a boy looking for love and escape in a vast, immersive MMO.

***Sci-Fi Now Magazine* (2012 Book of the Year, runner-up)**

In a dystopic yet uncomfortably familiar near-future, Lionel spends his days working in a government office and his nights as fantasy avatar Ludi in the online game world of CoreQuest. Ludi is blonde, muscular and intensely sexual; Lionel is mixed-race, awkward and introverted. Lionel was raised by an adoptive white family who never treated him as an equal – except for his adopted sister Lilith, his only friend, who keeps disappearing as soon as Lionel needs her.

Lionel falls for the seductive Eve, but soon becomes obsessed with a young girl working as a trafficked prostitute in the 'health centre' near his flat. But none of these women

are truly as they appear, and Lionel begins to wonder which is more real: his own life, or Ludi's.

Themes of virtual existence, family tensions and memory overlap to create a rich, compelling novel. Although there are multiple plot-threads concerning technological and political issues, the emotional core is Lionel's search for the truth of his birth and parentage. Occasionally the twin narratives of Lionel and Ludi don't seem to fit together, but when they do align it's wonderfully clever.

The Game is Altered is a slick and emotionally affecting novel – proof that Britain's independent publishers are putting out some of the most exciting fiction around. Author Mez Packer and publisher Tindal Street are both ones to watch.

Kirsty Logan, *We Love This Book/Goodreads*

Adopted African orphan, Lionel Byrd, spends the majority of this story suffering flashbacks to his traumatic childhood with his English adoptive parents and sadistic brothers. He struggles to make sense of his memories, helped only by his sister, Lilith—the only one of his siblings to treat him kindly.

When not reliving his childhood, Lionel spends his time in the gameworld of CoreQuest, where his heroic avatar, Ludi, can be the man he wishes he could be in real life. Things start going awry when Lionel's life in the gameworld begins to increasingly bleed into his real life and he becomes caught up in the seedy underworld of people trafficking.

If you are looking for a fast paced action/adventure story, then this novel is not for you. If you like introspective character studies then you may be on firmer ground with this tale. The majority of the book is a slow burn, as we learn about Lionel's past through his returning memories, with the pace only picking up in the final few chapters, when the people trafficking part of the story comes to a head.

Each chapter alternates with a short section following Ludi's adventures in CoreQuest. These sections are written in a pseudo-Clockwork Orange prose style, where you can be hit on the 'nog' or punched in the 'fizog'. The language took a bit of getting used to at first, but soon became second nature when reading these sections.

I was going to give this novel three stars due to the slow pace in the first three quarters of the book, but the uptick in action and the revelations in the final chapters did enough to bump it up to four stars.

A decent story by an obviously talented writer. Recommended, but don't expect all out action and thrills. **Michael O'Donnell**, <http://www.scifimike.com/book-reviews/scifimike-quick-review-the-game-is-altered>

Mez Packer's second novel is set in the near future. Mobile phones are now called Googles and "status has become something that people update, rather than earn". Lionel lives alone in a shabby flat opposite a brothel with his cat, Buddha, which has a brain tumour. Outside work, Lionel spends most of the time on his computer, custom-building avatars and hacking into servers to upload his characters to the online roleplaying game CoreQuest. By illegally smuggling Ludi, his avatar, into the game, Lionel manages to embroil himself with real-life people traffickers, pimps, underground freedom fighters and their virtual equivalents.

Ludi narrates his virtual adventures in a voice influenced by *A Clockwork Orange*'s Nadsat, only not nearly as elegant. The connection between Ludi's adventures and Lionel's life doesn't become clear until 200 pages into the novel, which until then lacks drama and tension. The game acts as a creaky extended metaphor – the illegal avatars and "power rings" the virtual world runs on are compared to the displaced communities working in the real world's energy farms. The prose often veers into overwritten descriptive phrases. And there are curious plot dead-ends: for example, Lionel's sexual attraction to his younger sister,

Lilith, is, during a memorably odd scene, reciprocated with enthusiasm – but this hot potato is dropped as soon as it appears.

Where the novel succeeds is in its portrayal of Lionel’s relationship with his adoptive family. Born in Africa to an unmarried Jamaican mother and adopted by a white English couple, Lionel is the odd one out—the “replicant” (as his brothers call him). He doesn’t remember much of his childhood, and when the memories start to come back, they aren’t pleasant. His brothers bullied and tortured him, tried to hang him and killed his first cat. When David, Lionel’s father, dies, Lionel is singled out at the funeral not as a member of the family, but as one of the dead man’s good deeds. Packer explores the fear and racism bubbling within this patched-together family.

The novel is also excellent on grief—Lionel’s obsessive tinkering with his computer as he attempts to create a virtual replica of Buddha humanises him. His plans to create an avatar for his sister hint at the thing he can't name, and his mother's prickliness and inability to face up to her husband's death are sensitively handled. Here, the writing is at its most subtle—Lionel is unable to manage his father’s slow death by Alzheimer’s, but his grief finds its expression in obsessive care for a cat suffering its own mental and physical decline. His adored younger sister is the only member of the family who loves him unconditionally, but she’s an unreliable presence, subject to strange rages and disappearances. Packer shows us Lionel’s vulnerability and his impotent efforts to stave off the inevitable pain of loss.

Through all of this Lionel is acquiescent and incurious. The real action of the novel—the people trafficking, the data-theft—is happening elsewhere and he either doesn’t notice it, or doesn’t understand it. It is clear he is being singled out at work for some special reason, but it takes a long time before he catches on. When we eventually find out why Lionel is so detached, why his adoptive mother hates him, and why Lilith seems to come and go without reason, his attitude makes sense. But the conclusion of the story feels curiously flat, as if the

real action has been taking place in a world to which the novel has never granted us access.

Jenn Ashworth, *The Guardian*

Original, gritty and beautifully written

It has been a while since I've read a book that I have snatched up at every opportunity, thinking to myself "Oh, just one more chapter," before going to bed, so I was surprised to be so gripped by 'The Game Is Altered'.

The story of Lionel is slightly sad, and incredibly real. It is set in the future, but not so far that it is out of the present day reader's reach - I expect that technology will advance in a very similar way to that described in the book. The characters are robust and complex, and I found myself deeply empathising with them. Yet, after feeling like I knew them inside-out, I was still shocked by the evolution of events along the way, and was genuinely surprised by the novels [sic] revelations. I like surprises.

I described the novel as 'gritty' in my title; as I mentioned, the story is incredibly 'real' and it does not skip the uncomfortable parts of reality. Packer approaches difficult topics surprisingly poetically. It is the detail, not just in these parts but the whole novel, that makes the book flow so well, despite having a complex story line.

I would recommend this to anyone who wants to read, and enjoy, a book unlike any they've read before, and I can't wait till my friends and family have read it so that I can talk to them about it!

Sian Buckley, *Amazon*

The Game is Altered

Mez Packer has given us a superb tale in *The Game Is Altered*. Set in the near future, we enter Lionel's world, which swings between real life and his complicated relationships with

his adopted family and his game playing life as the avatar Ludi. Gradually the lines between reality and the game become blurred, taking the reader on a roller coaster ride that touches on most of the major problems we have in the world today, but 'it's only a game' and the game can be altered. Mez Packer's writing is a joy and I highly recommend this book.

SJ Fournier, Amazon

An eerie look into the near future, beautifully told

The Game Is Altered was an engrossing read which twice nearly made me miss my station when reading it on the train. The book has three distinct threads that the chapters alternate between. The bulk of the plot and longest chapters are about Lionel, there are shorter chapters about his alter-ego Ludi adventuring in CoreQuest and then little one page adverts for CoreQuest, each of which was expertly crafted.

The book's extrapolation of modern trends in technology and British society create an eerily believable possibility for the near future. The growth and importance of the online self was a particularly worrying aspect that Packer explored. After reading I had a strong feeling of wanting to connect properly with someone rather than shouting about the book online (however I have come crawling back).

Packer's characters have a depth that makes the supporting cast particularly intriguing.

Lionel's adoptive mother, Judy, was a personal favourite whose personal development and story was fascinatingly seen alongside the primary narrative.

I would recommend this book to anyone who has an online presence, however large or small. Similarly anyone interested in family, identity, technology, immigration or the general direction our society may be headed should also pick it up. So many issues are thoughtfully touched on in a beautiful style that is great to read. Go on, add it to your basket, you deserve

the time offline!

M Bells, *Amazon*

Original and fascinating

Love the way reality gets blurred in this book - which is the real world? Although it has a lot of game-world in it, don't be put off if you're not a gamer. No technical knowledge required.

A really good story with a nice twist. **Rozzi, *Amazon***

An intriguing read

Another fascinating read from Mez Packer. *The Game is Altered* is a fast-paced, intriguing novel set in a slightly dystopian near future. Lionel lives in the thick of it in Milk Street where he observes the comings and goings at the 'adult health centre' and catches the eye of a strangely alluring young woman.

A whizz programmer, he spends much of his life in CoreQuest, an imaginary online world where hero Ludi is challenged by mutants, MauMaus and harridans. Lionel doesn't have many friends in the real world but he does have an adoptive sister called Lilith and an unwell cat. His past is a mystery, one even he cannot remember. As the story develops, the reader begins to wonder whether the present might be an illusion.

Mez Packer's characters are unique and mysterious. Nothing is what it seems. A page turner!

F Shelling, *Amazon*

What is the meaning of immortality in a digitised world?

Mez Packer gives us another fast-paced, engaging psychological thriller in this, her second novel from Tindal St. Combining exquisitely-observed characters and provocative ideas about the digital world most of us find ever-more-compelling, *The Game Is Altered* is a

hugely enjoyable, intriguing read that I gobbled up in one go. I loved the writing. Mez always finds the surprising but perfectly-expressed detail and can tell a story that kept me turning the pages well after I should have been doing something else. As in her first novel, *Among Thieves*, her eye for locale and gift for dialogue deliver convincing people who inhabit real places, which here include all the members of a stunningly dysfunctional family, a West Indian barbershop in a down-at-heel part of a dreary town, a nasty nightclub, and an utterly convincing fantasy-gaming world complete with its own language. Personally, I hope she will take Mr. Barber and write another book in which he is the main character. But whether she does or not, in *The Game Is Altered*, Ms Packer shows her ability not just as someone who can recall and write about her own past but as a writer who understands important larger issues deeply enough to posit where we all may be after a few more years hurtling down our road to a shared digital future.

Alex Brunel, *Amazon*

Good gamer sci-fi fiction

The story alternates between the real world and game world, though the line pretty much breaks down between the two later on in the book. Mez Packer is really really clever with language in the chapters that takes place game world and the gamer character Ludi is very funny with his game-speak dialogue. However, in the real world, the hero Lionel is too passive and the plot takes too long to get off the ground. And when it does, it's still lukewarm 2/3rds of the way through. It needs a faster pace to be truly engaging. Having said that, by the final 50 or so pages, I didn't want to put it down.

What's kind of scary (in a thought-provoking way) is the picture the author is painting of the near future in the Western world. Surveillance everywhere, drones spying on people, refugees locked down in transit centres, capitalism even more out of control. About the only good

thing is cars are pretty much gone and the motorways are abandoned. It just all rings too true that this is where we are headed.

I'd recommend this book for gamers who love to read fiction or sci-fi fans looking for an easy read. Mez Packer lectures in interactive media in the UK, so she's writing about a subject she loves. Her debut novel, *Among Thieves* was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, so I'm betting she'll keep getting better and better with her writing.

L Williams, *Amazon*

Appendix II Review of *Mindblindness*, Baron-Cohen (1997)

★★★★★ **This book goes to the core of the problem behind autism.**

By A Customer on 30 Sept. 1998

Format: Paperback

There are many books about autism and Asperger's syndrome, but they are all superficial. This is the only one that goes to the source of the problem itself: The brain at the hardware level.

What our consciousness 'sees' is not reality itself, but the output of battalions of highly specialized neurone co-processors that interpret reality in a distorted way engineered by Natural Selection to maximize our chances of surviving and reproducing.

We are blind to the existence of these unconscious perception mechanisms, and we confuse their perception of reality with reality itself. This is the reason why autism has been a mystery for so long, because it is not possible to understand autism without even knowing that these perception instincts exist.

Everything about this book is superlative. Autism is *very* *difficult* to understand even for us autistics, let alone Neurologically Typical. This guy has the ability to explain autism with concepts that make things rather easy to visualize. Concepts so befitting that leave me wondering how he manages to invent them.

Let me give one example: As a kid, I didn't see people like objects, but I didn't quite see them as people either. They were there, but they were not very important. That is as far as I can go explaining how it was for me. The only thing I can add is that I am not giving you anything more than a faint idea of how it really was.

What does Simon Baron-Cohen do? He introduces the concept of "skinbags." Bags of skin that move and talk like people but that are not quite people.

"Skinbags" is precisely what people were for me. They moved and talked, but they had no feelings. It was not that I believed that they had no feelings; it was that it never crossed my mind to consider the possibility.

The book makes you realize right from the start that nothing really exists as we imagine it. Not even color exists. Color is only an invention of Natural Selection... "that allows us to identify and interact with objects and the world far more richly than we otherwise could." Bats could very well use colors to "see" ultrasound reflections the same way we use colors to "see" electromagnetic waves.

The warmth of a smile and the anger of a stare do not exist either. You feel them only because your unconscious perception mechanisms interpret a smile as "warm" and a stare as "angry" and feed the appropriate feelings into your consciousness.

It must be really wonderful to be able to look at a girl and *feel* the warmth of her smile. When I look at a girl smiling I feel nothing. No warmth, no nothing. Those perception mechanisms are burned out in us autistics, or for some reason they do not reach our consciousness, maybe because of a faulty wire someplace.

I read almost every book there was in the Library system, and I began to really understand autism *only* after I read "Mindblindness."

Appendix III Screenshot from Facebook: ‘gamer speak’



The screenshot shows a Facebook conversation. At the top, a post from Eve is directed to Joëlle, dated 27 October 2010. The post contains a paragraph of text about gaming achievements. Below this, there are three replies from Joëlle, each with a timestamp and a 'Like' button. The replies continue the conversation about gaming, marriage, and a specific date.

Eve ► **Joëlle**
27 October 2010 ·

I just DESTROYED Branka. And the Bloodmother. Those bitched were HARD. CORE. I just got Morrigan and wacked their asses with a blizzard then got Oghren all over that shit with his axe. Oh yeah. Got it in the first try. Are you proud of me?

It's not the same playing it all alone though, I wish I was at home with you. Love you x x

Like Comment

Joëlle Pride doesn't cover it. I'm GLEAMING. Love. Dragon age showdown on the 18th. We're gonna finish my x-box run and get ready for Awakenings. You fuckin KNOWS it Xxx
27 October 2010 at 15:07 · Like

Eve AHA! Hell to the yeah. Apparently I can't marry Alistair because I'm an elf. HOW MUCH DOES THAT SUCK?! I totally forgot to harden him (aha!) when I did his personal quest. Gay gay gay. His approval rating of me is at 100, and I totally tapped that. Wish I'd filmed it, it was utterly cheesy and hilarious.
27 October 2010 at 15:20 · Like

Joëlle You cant marry him! poo. I wonder if i'll be able to marry Leliana. OMG. that would rule so deeply. HARDEN. HA. still have my little vid of me and her. god she's so hot. voice of an angel, body of a rogue. PRRR. is it very different on PC? my pooter is lame as lame can be.
27 October 2010 at 15:25 · Like

Joëlle p.s i hope you appreesh that by comin home on the 18th i am missing Wallis Bird's ONE paris date this year. THAT IS HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU.
27 October 2010 at 15:31 · Like

Appendix IV Screenshot of *Twitterwurking*, Breeze (2008)

-Twitterwurking Transcript-

1: goTo[to+Doro.thee+Wicked.Whi(t{e})ches(s)].
do[p]wn.the.ra[bitten].hole.we.go || twitter_set[tlers,all].
03:03 AM July 01, 2008 from web

2. shiver[mə.tym(panies)burrs]ing. st[l]one arms t.witching granite
blo.od[d?]. r[sh]iver.me + t[oxic]all[Ice].tale.u =....
03:28 AM July 02, 2008 from web

3. ...= _AllIce_[born.of.gra(vity)nite]. AllIce mewls+sITs+we[s]igh.ts//all
fLes[ion]h_grAve[L.rashed]. + .[user]Pine.like...
11:21 PM July 02, 2008 from web

4. i spy _Wh[n]ite.Which_.Sug[l]arings. i gASP+gr[K]oan; u c+
[+]d[ice]rink.me. up[per+AllIce.Downer]..
09:49 AM July 04, 2008 from web

5. AllIce.s[epia]tinks: c[sh]aving.bromidal. @if = @then [u:kno:u:want.2]; @u
fade_in+fLip[.out].
10:34 AM July 05, 2008 from web

6. ist[h]umble Up[on]+flick_r_ing><off.
soniKal[l]i_scr[sandstone_h]atching in_the @keyofnite.

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