Ada Lovelace to Babylonia.ca Alternate Endings: Using Fiction to Explore Design Futures Workshop

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Abstract
This position paper briefly introduces two art research experiments *Becoming Ada Lovelace* (2006) and *Babylonia.ca* (2012). The work demonstrates the use of design fiction to explore how the creation of artifacts aids in understanding collaborative art practices. We also include a statement of interest along with goals for participating in the Alternate Endings: Using Fiction to Explore Design Futures 1-day workshop.

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Alternate Reality Games, Design Fiction, New Media Art, Performance, and Fine Art Research.

ACM Classification Keywords
J.5 Arts and Humanities; K.4.0 Computers and Society: General; K.8.0 Personal computing: Games.

Introduction
In 2006, I read a series of letters written by Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace addressed to Charles Babbage[1]. Although, widely debated some claim that

[1] Charles Babbage realized the Analytical Engine which was intended as a general symbol manipulation and had some of the characteristics of today's computers in 1856, read more http://www.cbi.umn.edu/about/babbage.html

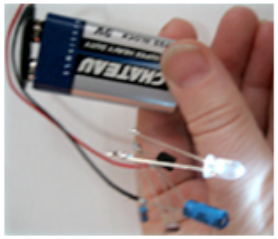

Figure 2. Performing Ada Lovelace, 2006
Detail of poster (top), 1-byte computing device (bottom).
The 2nd International Conference on Digital Live Art Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

Lovelace wrote the world's first algorithm intended to be carried out by a machine [6]. Lovelace was only 17 when her mother first introduced her to Mr. Babbage and their relationship grew over the years, through the playfulness of what she described as "Fairyism" an imaginary world of equals. In a letter to Babbage on Wednesday, July 5, 1843 [6], Lovelace wrote:

> *My Dear Babbage.*
>
> *By all respects I am much obliged by the contents of your letter…*
>
> *Why does my friend prefer imaginary roots to our friendship? Is it because you deny her the very imagination of which she possesses; you know she enjoys to play every now and again? Besides this, I deny the 'Fairyism' to be entirely imaginary (Lovelace 1843).*

The concept of "fairyism" in the 1800's literally meant fairyland enchantment, a mythic oasis. Based on our analysis of the letters, we think Lovelace used the term to describe the creative space in which technology was fictionalized and envisioned. From this perspective, Lovelace's letters were "artifacts" of a design fiction exercise with real-world implications.

Due to the limitations of this workshop submission, I will briefly discuss how I've used design fiction to produce two art experiments: *Performing Ada Lovelace* (2006) and *Babylonia.ca* (2012). Although these experiments are years apart upon reflection they are similar both in their use of fiction as a model for experimenting with technology concepts.

PERFORMING ADA LOVELACE [2006]

This art experiment called *Performing Ada Lovelace* was a collaborative project with architect Tristan d'Estrée Sterk[2]. The work explored the use of performance as a design tool for understanding how we could weave together history and contemporary art interests through a device [3]. The performance narrative was directly inspired by Ada Lovelace's translation of the Italian mathematician Luigi Menabrea's memoir on Charles Babbage's proposed machine - the Analytical Engine between 1842-1843 [2].

In this article Ada appended a set of notes detailing a plan for calculating Bernoulli numbers for Babbage's machine. We read different passages from the memoirs and sketched out ideas that resulted in the design of a 1-byte computer that functioned as a light-sensing device (figure 1 bottom). We presented the devise in a 3-minute theatrical reading (figure 1 top). The result of this experiment was the collection of design artifacts, including: the audio recording, 100-light sensing devices and a series of documentation photographs. In other words, Ada Lovelace's memoirs provided a "fictional" design space for us to create artifacts and learn more about our creative process.

THE BABYLONIA EXPERIMENT [2012]

In 2010, I started working with Dr. Carman Neustaedter in the Connection Lab, SIAT, SFU. He had just finished building *Seeit.com* a location-based game platform, with mechanics similar to other treasure hunt

[2] Tristan d'Estrée Sterk is the founder of the Office for Robotic Architectural Media & The Bureau for Responsive Architecture. A small technology office that develops new construction systems and components for building, read more at: http://www.orambra.com/#sthash.nFgPAiEB.dpuf

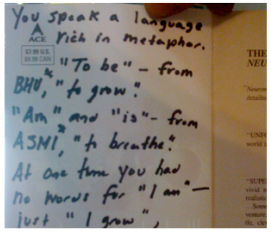

Figure 2. Babylonia, 2012 Free Fall Festival, Toronto
Detail of live performance (top), Detail of hidden letter in bookstore (bottom)

activities like geocaching (without GPS). Participants playing the game could search for hidden 'spots' using video and photographic clues. After some testing, Neustaedter established that the online treasure hunt game was successfully. We then partnered with *Radix Theatre Company*[3] to create a rich story-narrative that would utilize the game platform. Babylonia.ca (figure 2) was completed as a live Performance for the Free Fall Festival, March 2012. The goal of this 4-day long event was for people to watch Jordan Mapplethorpe's video diaries and follow directives called *Memory Anchors*, which invited them to upload various images and text to the story narrative. On the last day, the audience was invited to the live-performance where upon their arrival Mapplethorpe would lead them to "digital nirvana" through a mind-mapping exercise.

To understand the collaborative and interdisciplinary practice we reviewed all 246-pages of the email correspondence of our collaboration along with 31-attachments, including sketches, wireframes, interaction designs and orchestration maps. We utilized data analysis techniques from sociology to systematically abstract empirical data into categories and theoretical constructs [1].

Through this process we learned that some writers are highly skilled at crafting transitions called *directives,* that if properly interpreted through the system design can propel the audience's advancement through the story-narrative with *performative* action [4].

[3] Radix Theatre, is an interdisciplinary *theatre company* offering site-specific performances in Vancouver, BC, Canada, read more *www.radixtheatre.org*

Goals for the Workshop

In this paper, we have demonstrated our use of design fiction through the characterization of two experiments. We have discussed some of the benefits of using fiction as a tool for creating design artifacts that helped us understand the collaborative process and relationships between designers, artists, writers, programmers and technologists. Our goal for participating in the forthcoming workshop is to share insights and participate in activities that lead to the creation of future work.

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