fanSHEN’s *Looking for Love*: A Case Study in how Theatrical and Performative Practices Inform Interactive Digital Narratives

**Abstract.** This paper explores how theatrical and performative practices inform interactive digital narratives. It does this through a case study of *Looking for Love*, a new piece by fanSHEN. The creative process used to create *Looking for Love* is analysed in terms of its roots in theatrical processes, particularly in terms of characterization, the relationship between structure and improvisation, dramatic arc and the role of the spectator.

**Keywords:** Interactive digital narratives, Interactive theatre, Performance, fanSHEN, Looking for Love, Joe McAlister

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the conference theme “Interactive Digital Narrative Practices” and particularly focuses around the question of how theatrical and performative practices inform interactive digital narratives and vice versa.

It explores this question through a case study of fanSHEN who began as a theatre company and now describe themselves as “a recovering theatre company, who now design and create audience-centric experiences which involve elements of performance, game and installation.” (1). fanSHEN are part of a generation of artists who are doing what Giannachi and Benford describe as employing “digital technologies to create distinctive forms of interactive, distributed, and often deeply subjective theatrical performance.” (2)

This paper explores how fanSHEN’s theatrical and performative background is informing their creative process and how they are adapting this process to create work in this new art form. It draws on my own experience as a collaborator on this project and on interviews I held with fanSHEN’s Creative Director Rachel Briscoe and with *Looking for Love*’s computational artist Joe McAlister in July 2018.

It is not new for theatrical methodologies to inform interactive fiction; the techniques of improvisational theatre in particular have deeply informed the work of Brian Magerko and others (3), (4). Similarly, concepts from interactive fiction and games design have deeply informed how performance scholars think about participatory and immersive performance (5) (6). This paper seeks to identify what might be unique in the creation and experience of *Looking for Love* and what applications it might have for future interactive fiction or research.

1. Context about fanSHEN
   1. fanSHEN’s trajectory towards interactive digital performance

fanSHEN were formed in 2007. Their early productions were of contemporary plays performed in a fairly naturalistic style. Their knowledge of dramaturgy (the technique of dramatic composition) was nurtured through Creative Director Rachel Briscoe’s participation in the young writers’ programmes at the Royal Court and Soho theatres (7). Their rehearsal process was deeply rooted in the Stanislavski System of Acting. Both of these methodologies continue to inform their work, including the creative development of *Looking for Love*.

Their work became increasingly interactive over a number of productions, first using analogue technologies to stimulate interaction and then digital ones (in productions such as *Invisible Treasure, Disaster Party* and *Out of* Sight). fanSHEN embarked on their first collaboration with computational artist Joe McAlister, *The Justice Syndicate* in 2017*.* In this piece, 12 co-located audience-participants take on the role of jurors considering a difficult case. Each participant has a tablet on which they receive evidence (in document form), watch videos of witness testimonies, receive prompts to debate the case with fellow jurors and vote. The software behind the piece uses machine learning to send tasks to individuals based on their voting pattern in order to attempt to sway them from their original position. It also uses the voting data and time spent looking at different documents to attempt to predict the final vote of each juror and the overall outcome.

**2.2 Looking for Love: fanSHEN’s First Piece of Interactive Fiction**

*Looking for Love* is a collaboration between Rachel Briscoe (fanSHEN’s Creative Director), computational artist Joe McAlister and me.

In *Looking for Love* the participant starts by creating a dating profile and answering a personality quiz on an explicitly fictionalised dating app. They are then matched with three characters and choose one that they wish to continue chatting with. They chat with this character over a period of three weeks, over which time the character gradually reveals more and more about themselves and their story while also attempting to gather information about the participant. As the piece progresses, the character (who is played by a chat bot – and the participant is made aware of this at the beginning) also tries to adapt themselves more and more to the tastes of the participant, attempting to become their ideal partner, with shared values, habits and preferences. After three weeks the participant and character arrange to meet in a café. When the participant arrives at the café they have an Augmented Reality experience in which they see an animation of the “date” as if from the position of a spectator. As the two animated characters talk, the participant sees the character’s thoughts and realises how much the character knows about them. They are then invited to look round an exhibition about data privacy and are given guidance on how to protect their data.

Briscoe sees the piece and how fanSHEN have developed it as a logical continuation of fanSHEN’s work in terms of how it places the audience at the centre of the artwork: “I think we have been working with a dramaturgy of interactivity for the last three years. So it’s about creating a structure and a series of really clear invitations and I think that’s going to be as important here.”

**3 Narrative structures and theatrical elements in *Looking for Love***

**3.1 Narrative Structures and Dramaturgies**

A key respect in which *Looking for* Love departs from most interactive fiction is in the nature of the characters and the character development process. In the majority of interactive fiction, the characters that the reader/player encounters have a plot function and are often of necessity archetypal rather than complex as this helps the reader/player know how to interact with them. In *Looking for Love,* the player only interacts with one character throughout, enabling a greater level of complexity to emerge. Having established the basic shape of the piece, fanSHEN began the second week of development by creating a number of characters, in an approach analogous to the devising techniques of Mike Leigh and Mike Bradwell (8). While each player only interacts with one character, a number of characters exist within the piece so that the date you are matched with has a background and personality that make them a believable dating partner for the player. The questions that we used to develop the characters spanned both serious personality-forming topics (defining childhood experience, thing I’m most ashamed of, proudest moment) to topics particularly relevant to this piece (brands I like, preferred source of news, celebrity I think I resemble) to bespoke questions that would contribute to building the characters’ chat bots (phrases or words I use a lot, quality of punctuation and grammar). Inspired by fanSHEN’s study of drama and acting techniques, particularly those of American acting teacher Susan Batson (9) each character was built with a surface persona, an underlying secret and a source of grief.

In all truly interactive performance and in much one-on-one performance there is a balance between structure (which Briscoe described in her interview with me as a series of ‘really clear invitations”) and improvisation, sections in which the participant responds to those invitations and the performer(s) (where they are present) reacts. What is original about *Looking for Love*, in the field of performance at any rate, is the way in which this improvisatory role is being adopted by a chat bot rather than by a human. As computational artist Joe McAlister put it in his interview with me: “we follow a loose narrative that allows the player to provide multiple forms of response via text, or image, which a bot subsequently analyses and responds to relevantly. Unlike other interactive fiction, the user is free to guide this conversation in any direction they wish, chatting with the bot in regards to any subject.” The chat bot is built with the aim of maintaining the illusion of a consistent and three-dimensional character through particular uses of language, that differ for each character (for example use of capitalization, grammar, habitual words for “good” and “bad” and repeated characteristic phrases) and through programming that combines improvisatory chat bot activity trained with LSTM Recurrent Neural Networks with text scripted by humans. For example, near the beginning of the experience the character suggests that you ask each other questions about what is written in your dating profile. Whichever topic the player asks about, there is a keyword-generated human-scripted response. On specific days over the three-week experience, the character sends human-scripted accounts of things that have happened in their life or asks the player pre-programmed questions. In between these pre-programmed interactions, the bot is programmed to engage in free chat whenever the player contacts them; ending conversations when there are questions it cannot respond to in a way intended to seem natural. This model is intended to address for the purposes of this artwork what Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern describes as “the fundamental freedom between player freedom and story structure.” (10). In this sense, the piece is, arguably, an example of what Mateas calls Expressive AI:

Expressive AI is a new interdiscipline of AI-based cultural production combining art practice and AI research practice. Expressive AI changes the focus from an AI system as a thing in itself (presumably demonstrating some essential feature of intelligence) to the communication between author and audience. The technical practice of building the artifact becomes one of exploring which architectures and techniques best serve as an inscription device within which the authors can express their message. (11)

Briscoe describes the narrative structure of *Looking for Love* as a “reverse branching narrative.” In contrast to the classic model of interactive fiction, in which all players start in the same situation and then take a series of choices that take the story in different directions, *Looking for Love* begins with a broad choice of which character to talk to, with each character having their own tastes and preferred topics. Whatever choices the participant makes, however, they all lead to the encounter in the café in which the Augmented Reality animation reveals what it knows about the participant. Approximately two weeks in to the experience, the character will reveal the story of the death of their previous partner and discuss their grief about the topic. The identity of the partner, the story of how they died and the way in which the character deals with their grief varies from character to character, but the basic structure remains the same.

fanSHEN’s structuring of the journey that the participant goes on in their dialogue with the character is influenced by dramatic structures such as Freytag’s dramatic arc, consisting of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement (12). As Briscoe commented “I think the biggest thing about traditional story is that it means you keep watching” This reflects the findings of Petrelli and Wright that readers of digital fiction still want the story to “pull them along.” (13)

When I interviewed Joe McAlister I asked him in what way collaborating with theatre artists such as Rachel Briscoe and me seemed different to the process of collaborating with a fellow computational artist. He responded:

“Dan and Rachel bring extensive knowledge of how to create an engaging and emotional narrative, something that I believe to be key to creating a realistic and relatable AI character. They also bring an entirely different approach to building this piece, unlike the methodical technology-centric approach that I am accustomed to.”

**3.2 Personalization and Privacy**

*Looking for Love* personalizes the participant’s experience in various ways. The participant is matched with a character after taking a “personality quiz’ so that they are already offered a character who matches some of their tastes and opinions. Based on the information gleaned from this quiz, the character is already adapted to suit the participant; they prefer cats to dogs or cycling to driving if you do, or vice versa. In ensuing interactions, the character asks you to suggest a song for them to listen to and a few days later sends a similar song. They ask about your favourite films and then later use gifs from them. The programme scans the participant’s social media and then sends them news stories with a similar political perspective. The purpose of this is both to explore how much we are drawn to people with similar tastes and opinions as ourselves but also to reveal to participants the price of personalization in terms of the volume of private information that we leak. In the final augmented reality section this data is revealed to the participant in manner designed to jolt them into a realization about how much information they leak online.

**3.3 The role of the participant/spectator**

For the first three weeks of the piece until the Augmented Reality section in the café, the participant is one of two protagonists in the action, together with the character they are interacting with. The Augmented Reality section is an abrupt stylistic shift but also an abrupt shift in the role of the audience member, from active participant to that of a spectator, watching the action unfold before them. This shift in the role of the audience member is intended to help give them critical distance and invite them to reflect on how much information they have given away about themselves in an echo of the “attitude of criticism” that Brecht aimed sometimes to create for his audiences, in part through the use of the Verfremdungseffekt (14).

**3.4 *Looking for Love* as Immersive or One-on-One Performance**

In many respects, Looking for Love can be read as a continuation of the trend for “one on one” theatre and performance. According to Adam Alston, “one-on-one theatre is usually designed to be experienced by individual audience members in isolation from anyone other than a performer, or performers… One-on-one theatre tends to be participatory and may invite audiences to perform tasks, or interact with something or someone” (15). What *Looking for Love* shares with one-on-one theatre is the level of intimacy that fanSHEN are aiming for between the participant and the character. The key difference is that, whereas in one-on-one theatre, the participant and performer(s) are co-located, in *Looking for Love* the participant and character and not co-located and instead the communication is mediated via a mobile phone. This raises questions over whether *Looking for Love* might be described as “immersive.” According to Calleja, immersion can refer to a range of experiences including “general engagement, perceptions of realism, addiction, suspension of disbelief and identification with games characters.” (16). While *Looking for Love* might achieve absorption, the suspension of disbelief (participants can simultaneously know the character is a bot and treat it like a human being) and identification with the character, it does not seem to fit theatrical definitions of immersive:

“immersive theatre establishes a special kind of presence – visceral in every respect, being both embodied and noetic. In the realm of theatre, it can be understood that this feeling of “being there” is a fact; the audience-participant *is actually there*, physically inhabiting the fantasy world created.” (17)

However, the “actually there” of online dating is wherever your phone is; it is an online rather than a physical space. According to Briscoe, she is interested in whether this permits a greater level of intimacy and emotional risk. In a blog she wrote:

“In research for a current project, I had a number of conversations about online dating. People said they were bolder, revealed more and took more risks while chatting online than they would have done face-to-face; research around computer-mediated communication would confirm this, and that it has to do with not getting verbal or visual feedback from the person you’re talking to (so you’re less likely to feel disapproved of). But one person also said something very interesting: that we tend, in general, to conflate emotional and physical safety when actually they’re very different. When messaging from her house, where she was surrounded by all her stuff, warm, in comfy clothes etc, she felt physically safe – and this allowed her to take more emotional risks and reveal more.” (18)

What may be lost in this process is the visceral, embodied experience made possible in co-located one-on-one or immersive performance. Does this potential lack of visceral embodiment mean that the level of intimacy and emotional risk in *Looking for Love* is less than in co-located one-on-one performance or is it merely different? In her analysis of Blast Theory’s *Karen*, which is also experienced entirely via a phone and in which the participant interacts with a fictional life coach, Maria Chatzichristodoulou argues that the intimacy is, if anything, more intense:

“My relationship with Karen becomes increasingly complex and challenging, forcing me to ask myself questions about some uncomfortable matters.” (19)

**4 Conclusion**

*Looking for Love* I,s arguably, a unique combination of digital performance and interactive fiction. In its creation of an intimate dialogue between a participant and character and its combination of structure and improvisation, it has similarities to one-on-one performance with the key differences that the character and participant are not co-located and the character is a chat bot rather than a human performers. It has some parallels with pieces like Blast Theory’s *Karen* but whereas *Karen* gives the participant a limited range of choices, *Looking for Love* uses chat bot technologies to enable much more improvisation and machine learning to enable a higher level of personalization. It differs from much interactive fiction in the use of a complex character, created using theatrical character creation processes. The particular mix of chat bot improvisation and human-scripted text is unusual. The piece is currently in development; there is the potential for valuable future research into how well these elements function in terms of the participant’s experience; how well they achieve Mateas’ vision of “expressive AI” and what adjustments need to be made in terms of how they could function better.

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