

Conclusion

Approaching Virtuality

Birds will once again appear when a bird feeder is placed.
Children no longer wake up in a panic every time they wake up.
The police chief can no longer be the suspect in a crime.¹

Since its publication by the Electronic Arts corporation in 2014, the video game *The Sims 4* has accrued seventy-two ‘patches’: corrective updates to its programming code. In software development, the documentation of such electronic errata tends towards the technical; most users of Microsoft Word, for instance, would not be expected to know that in July 2018 it was repaired to prevent ‘Memory leaks when you open and close a document that contains Embedded Object Linking and Embedding (OLE) objects’.² The developers of *The Sims 4*, however, have identified a unique opportunity in presenting their ‘patch notes’, rather than in terms of Boolean flags or subroutines, as a reflection on the fictionality of their own game.

Originally conceived by the developer Will Wright as a digital ‘doll-house for adults’, the popular *Sims* franchise (currently on its fourth instalment) is a game of the everyday.³ Players begin by designing one or more characters, determining their age, gender, ethnicity, hobbies, ambitions, and even psychological traits; then build a house for them to inhabit, putting in walls and windows, buying lamps and fridges and showerheads from an extensive inventory of options for each; then guide their characters through a virtual life, from prompting them to make dinner and clean the house, to fulfilling long-term objectives like starting a family or pursuing a career. As Diane Nutt and Diane Railton have argued, if this new medium can be analysed with traditional concepts of genre, the genre at hand is ‘real life’ (‘albeit [...] a very Western suburban family life’), through whose language and conventions players parse the ‘fiction’ represented by the moving bits on screen, and perceive the narrative possibilities made available as well as delimited by the system.⁴ Players know that *The Sims 4* will not allow them (as with other games) to kill a dragon or invade a

country, because its priorities and limits are set around the material (and consumeristic) aesthetics of domestic life: there are six types of home coffee machine available in the game, each lovingly crafted by a graphic artist.

I give this idiosyncratic account not, as I attempt to do with the archives of worldplay, to suggest formal or historical affinities with literary works, but because the 'patch notes' of a digital everyday undergoing technical repair can help to place us into the logical or cognitive space which it has been my aim to recover as a reading practice of the novel and to cultivate as a critical perspective. That distinction of volitional imagining which I have called the double consciousness, explicit pretence, or virtuality of fiction is intuitively evoked by the observation, deadpan, that the children of *The Sims* have been collectively terrorised in the night by a misfiring line of code. The metaleptic humour of these notes arises from exposing the imagined world as one explicitly governed by systems (electronic and discursive) of representation, not in order to spoil the game, but to intensify the original, peculiar appeal of an artificial reality. The children are imaginary, and we must save them from distress; it is only because they are imaginary that we can. As Lewes pointed out in 1872, the wheels on a wooden horse make clear both its inadequacy as a portrayal and its utility as a toy, its appropriation of the image of a horse for encounters only an artificial animal can offer. It is one thing to go out and feed the pigeons; it is another, specific experience to participate in fictional or vicarious actions, to offer digital seeds to imaginary birds which 'will once again appear', as if a season has come in a way it never could in life.

Virtual Play has proposed this distinction as a significant intervention into the theory and criticism of mid-Victorian novel fiction, the preeminent literary form of 'believable stories that [do] not solicit belief'.⁵ There is a 'patch notes' logic at work in Brontë's *Glass Town*, when her narrator complains that the author-gods of his universe are threatening to write its apocalypse, or in Trollope's explanations that his heroines behave as they do because they happen to live in a narrative world. Yet such reflections on the generic-metaphysical peculiarities of fictional worlds have long been sidelined in novel criticism, which frequently smooths over these admissions, or repudiates them as blandly ironic or artistically anomalous. Taking such reflections seriously, and recovering their anomalousness as features of a coherent imaginative practice, allows us to disrupt the complacent sense that novels are abstractly 'reflective', 'symbolic', or 'representative' of historical or universal conditions, or merely aesthetic arrangements of language.

The practice of virtual worlds, from *Angria* to *The Sims*, reveals other uses for verisimilitude than these. The case studies here of Brontë, Trollope, Thackeray, and Dickens have suggested the alternative social, ethical, and artistic functions novels in particular perform by virtue of their patchy, artificial realities: in a world which is known to be imaginary, even decades of alienated labour can be contemplated with desire and pleasure; the fulfilment of moral duties can become a matter of creative invention; feelings of dependency and attachment can be freed from material exigencies; lack and loss can be survived by extending the scope of living beyond one's immediate surroundings. The novel's simultaneous capacity for literality and unreality, concreteness and imaginariness, is an unacknowledged resource of the form which this book has only begun to explore but – more importantly – seeks to make available as a subject of criticism.

In making this case for the *useability* of novels, I have chosen in this book to offer a partial view: prioritising accounts of how the authors, readers, and characters of these texts employ the virtual for pleasure, sustenance, or agency (and how we can too). I choose to retrace these 'histories of use' over more suspicious interpretations of imaginative experience as ideological reproduction or interpolation, partly to respect the accounts of historical readers about how they make value out of such experiences, and partly to ally the participatory perspective of the virtual with recent projects of 'reparative' and 'postcritical' reading, a disciplinary shift from methods of suspicion and demystification to new phenomenologies of agency and possibility. A criticism of fictional experience (rather than of aesthetic experience more broadly) demands an especially involved version of this disciplinary call to replace 'looking behind the text – for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives' with descriptions of 'what [the text] unfurls, calls forth, makes possible'.⁶ Suppose we each had an island of our own, suggests eleven-year-old Charlotte Brontë, what could we do with it? What options become available? I have characterised my own approach as a 'vicarious' criticism because to hypothesise the possibilities of fictional experience, even if only to document its formal and historical affordances ('Well, I suppose one could . . .'), is already to start playing the game. If distance and detachment have become the default moods of literary analysis, the studies in this book conversely work hand in glove with the authors and readers it examines, understanding how they (and how to) put fiction to use, learning by doing.

Of course, not everything that a novel or game makes available for imaginative experience is good or desirable, or should be free from critical scrutiny. What remains importantly to be explored, and what I hope this

work opens for exploration, are new approaches of scrutinisation which can account for the distinctiveness of virtual and vicarious experiences. The content of *The Sims* is indisputably shaped by a strong ideological picture of 'real' or 'normal' life, an argument which has also been made of nineteenth-century realism.⁷ But as the patch notes show, encountering this picture as explicit artifice is an experience prone to accident and surprise. It is again one thing to believe that police chiefs do not commit crimes; it is another, much more ambiguous in motive and commitment, to reprogram an imaginary world so as to render police corruption metaphysically impossible; which is different also from a radical imagining of a world without police. Emma Butcher presents a strong test-case in the graphic descriptions of colonial violence featured in the Brontës' tales of Glass Town and Angria, deployed against a fictionalised version of the sub-Saharan Ashanti people, and borrowed (like so many of their non-physical 'toys') from their contemporary reading materials:

It is through these horrifying descriptions that the siblings were able to convey the prejudices displayed in contemporary writings [...] their imaginations and writings were firmly grounded in the lurid language of published war reportage. Their mimicry of racism consolidates their positions as recorders of their society's prejudices[.]⁸

The claims in *Virtual Play* about the distinction between virtuality and reference do not amount to an argument for dismissing the troubling nature of this violence. Rather, such claims suggest that this violence is troubling for more particular and ethically complicated reasons than the passive reproduction or mimicry of racist ideologies from reader to reader. There is a categorical difference between the racist reporting in *Blackwood's Magazine* and the racism of fictionalising native peoples as targets for explicitly imagined acts of violence, and this difference is morally significant (even if not morally mitigating) for how it complicates the relationship between cultural context and individual agency.

For critics of different generations, the further questions I begin to frame here may recall either the cultural, academic, and policy debates over pornography in the 1970s and 80s, or those over video game violence in the 1990s and the early millennium – or ones over the ethics of sex with robots, which are at this moment emerging even ahead of the technology itself.⁹ Although the empirical and philosophical arguments underpinning those debates remain inconclusive and deeply divisive, the urgency of those around porn and gaming have in some ways already been overwhelmed by the ubiquity of these forms of vicarious experience.¹⁰ In describing *The Professor* as a pornographic realism, I drew from the work of Nancy Bauer:

[W]e are past the point, if we were ever there, at which a bipolar politics of pornography, for or against, could be of use to us [. . .] What we need now is not a new politics of porn but, rather, a candid phenomenology of it, an honest reckoning with its powers to produce intense pleasure and to color our ordinary sense of what the world is and ought to be like. Such a reckoning will have to involve a refocusing of our attention, from the male consumers who took center stage in the porn wars to the women for whom the pornutopia provides a new standard of beauty and of sexual fulfilment.¹¹

What vicarious reading offers now is a similar project of understanding fiction's possibilities, for better or worse, and its history as part of a still-evolving tradition of simulated experience. Literary studies, with its attentiveness to individual texts and its long view of form and reception, has unique contributions to make alongside philosophy and the social sciences in the study of fictional actions literally performed.

To do this, we must advocate for the courage to approach our objects of study with intimate participation and a willingness to encounter, with the confidence that we will find something more surprising and useful than our reaffirmation as ideological subjects. Although the postcritical has sometimes been characterised as a replacement of cynicism with more positive critical affects, another way to consider this 'turn' may be as an increased tolerance for risk. Play, as the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott proposed, is fundamentally a matter of trust.¹² Like many situations in life and some (well- or ill-intentioned) people we meet, novels call on us to do unreasonable things: to expand the geography of England, to place non-existent people into history, 'to perform the rather startling (upon examination) action of believing that inside the novel is not only a three-dimensional space but a person'.¹³ Yet for Winnicott, an unwillingness to risk play can inhibit modes of action and knowledge that arise from the experience of being involved. Moreover, choosing to accept the imaginative premises of fiction does not amount to a conscription of 'belief' – only a conscious agreement in service of, and provisional on, a shared practice or activity for mutual use or value. In this book, I have tried to document the results of a literary criticism that steps forward to participate in the novel, which is no more than a child does by going along with a sibling's proposal for a make-believe. There is much that, as De Quincey bemoaned, one stands to suffer and lose by accepting. But there is also much that we stand to miss in the refusal.