“You know, are you you?”: Being versus playing the second-person in digital fiction

BELL, Alice <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9737-4081>

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Alice Bell (Sheffield Hallam University, UK)

Abstract

This essay explores the uses and effects of the second-person in digital fiction from the perspective of cognitive poetics, narratology, and digital media theory. It begins by showing ways in which the second-person has been used in digital fictions such as Interactive Fiction (IF), hypertext fiction, and videogames. It then presents findings from an empirical study on Blast Theory's app-fiction *Karen* by showing the various ways in which reader-players accept and reject the second-person address in that text. I argue that current typologies of 'you' need to be expanded to accommodate the varied reader responses to 'you' and argue for an empirically-based, reception-orientated approach to the second-person in fiction across media.

Introduction

This essay explores the uses and effects of the second-person in digital fiction from the perspective of cognitive poetics, narratology, and digital media theory. It begins by showing ways in which the second-person has been used in digital fictions such as Interactive Fiction (IF), hypertext fiction, and videogames. It then presents findings from an empirical study on Blast Theory's app-fiction *Karen* by showing the various ways in which reader-players accept and reject the second-person address in that text. I argue that current typologies of 'you' need to be expanded to accommodate the varied reader responses to 'you' and argue for an empirically-based, reception-orientated approach to the second-person in fiction across media.

Digital Fiction and 'you'

Digital fiction is "fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al. 'Screed' n.p.). It is fiction whose structure, form and meaning are dictated by the computational context in which it is produced and received and includes hypertext fiction, hypermedia fiction (including fiction produced using digital multimedia software and programming languages, such as Flash, QuickTime, JavaScript), Interactive Fiction (IF), app-fictions for touchscreen devices, narratively-driven videogames, and some fiction produced in Augmented and Virtual Reality. Digital fictions are always text-based but also often contain other modes such as sound, image, or film. Readers often make choices about their journey through a digital fiction either by following links or by responding to textual or visual prompts from the work. Readers are therefore involved in the construction of these multimodal narratives and must interact throughout the reading experience.

The textual 'you' features widely across digital, interactive texts (see Bell and Ensslin 'I know'; Ensslin and Bell *Digital*). Interactive Fiction (IF), for example, employs the second-person throughout, building the storyworld using present tense (e.g., *Zork*'s "You are standing in an open field [...]" [Infocom]) and imperatives (e.g. *Zork*'s "You must specify a direction") and creating the illusion of being present in a storyworld that is constructed by the reader in collaboration with the programmed text. In IFs, the textual 'you' thus informs the reader about the basic building blocks of the game world and allows them to co-construct this domain by inputting text commands in the hope of receiving more textual information (cf.

Walker). In IFs, the textual ‘you’ is the main character, role-played by the reader (Douglass 129).

Many hypertext fictions employ second-person narration as a means of drawing attention to and harnessing the reader’s somewhat unique function in the text. In hypertext fiction, the reader has an active role. They must move a mouse and click a button or type a response on a keyboard in order to learn more about the storyworld and its inhabitants. When coupled with a second-person address, attention is drawn to the corporeal and heuristic role that readers play in hypertext fiction or what Espen Aarseth defines as the “nontrivial effort [that] is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1). In Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, for example, the protagonist tells the reader “I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal,” with readers then required to choose links which provide information about the protagonist. The reader must move a mouse and click a button or type a response on a keyboard in order to learn more about the fictional world and its inhabitants thus uniting the reader with the “you” of the address.

Second-person address is also used extensively in videogame discourse and the paratexts surrounding the primary artefacts (such as manuals, discussion fora, blogs and gaming magazines). Primarily, videogames often use the second-person to tell the protagonist/player what their mission is in the gameworld (e.g. “You must rescue X from Y”). Unlike text-based IFs and hypertext fictions, however, in a videogame the player sees their alter ego embodied in the shape of an avatar, an object, vehicle or simply a cursor that they can control, further cementing the relationship between the ‘you’ and the player. As Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin note, “you are the person for whom the story is being told” (xiv) with the “you” here filling the role(s) enabled by any chosen game’s avatar selection or customisation mechanism.

What the three preceding examples show is that in a digital context, being addressed by ‘you’ is not particularly unusual and in fact might even constitute a medium-specific linguistic convention. After all, ubiquitous software programs such as word processers, email packages, and social media platforms regularly address users using the second-person (e.g. Microsoft’s “Save your changes to this file?”; Facebook’s “What’s on your mind?”).

Yet the prevalence of 'you' in digital media does not mean that it goes unnoticed or that readers/players/users always respond positively to being addressed by the second-person. As this chapter will show, 'you' can generate polarised responses precisely because it can claim to know something about its addressee(s) (cf. Fludernik 230). In what follows, I report on my empirical research into Blast Theory's app-fiction *Karen* and suggest that readers of digital fiction are just as likely to reject the 'you' position as they are to adopt it but that the interactive nature of digital fiction reading means that they have to at least tolerate it, if they are to continue through the text.

'You' and *Karen*

Karen is an app-fiction for smartphones which was released by Blast Theory in 2015. The app uses full motion video and interactive interface elements to construct a storyworld around protagonist Karen, a middle-aged British woman who is assigned as the reader's[1] life coach. Over the course of eight days, readers receive seventeen short video calls from Karen in which she divulges information about herself or else gathers information about the reader by asking her/him multiple-choice questions, requiring her/him to input text, or select a point on a slider scale question.

While Karen is apparently the reader's life coach, Karen often undermines her otherwise intermittent professionalism. In the reader's first encounter with the app, she walks through a street and up some stairs into her flat. She looks into the camera and says enthusiastically "I'm looking forward to getting to know you" with the use of a second-person address apparently directed at the reader. However, she undermines her authority as a life-coach by adding "a bit nervous." The first question that Karen asks the reader to respond to is prefaced with "I am knackered." The low-register "knackered" implies an inappropriate level of familiarity with someone whom she has only just met and the declaration itself is also unprofessional in a life-coaching session. One of the answers from which the reader can choose – "This feels weird" –pre-empts what they might be feeling in response to Karen's informal and overfamiliar style.

Likewise, as the narrative progresses, the questions that Karen asks us change from being predominantly professional to decidedly unprofessional. Many of her early questions focus on topics that are typical of life-coaching with readers asked to give more information about themselves such as their personal goals, the names of people special to them, and the way

they feel about their lives via multiple choice hyperlinks. For example, Karen asks “Which area is most important for you right now?” with readers asked to choose between: “I want to take more control in my life”, “I want to change my attitudes to relationships”, and “I want to review my life goals”. As the narrative progresses, however, Karen begins to ask more intimate and inappropriate questions with topics including drug-taking (e.g. “Did I ever tell you about my ecstasy days?”) and sexual encounters (e.g. asking “Should I go for it?” with her date). If the reader misses a scheduled interaction with Karen, they receive a text message notification from her to say so, which, like the multiple questions, range from friendly and innocuous (e.g. “I'm ready to get going when you are”) to overfamiliar and potentially noncommittal while, at the same time, quite pushy (“Erm, yeah, we should do a session”).

In the tenth episode of the serial, a character called Dave (Karen’s roommate) begins calling readers – initially without Karen’s knowledge – in order to undermine the apparent confidentiality of the coaching process and admit his romantic feelings for Karen. Meanwhile, Karen becomes increasingly erratic and she and other characters cross more personal boundaries with Karen ultimately asking us to help her with her apparently dysfunctional romantic relationship with Dave. In the last interaction, and without warning that the narrative is about to end, readers see Karen’s empty flat with all of her belongings removed, as though she never existed or else she has left never to return. However, she has taken with her the reader’s responses to her questions and thus any personal information that they have given.

Of course, Karen is not real and thus it is ontologically impossible for her to be in a real dialogue with the reader. The actor playing her is performing a script and the reader cannot interrupt or guide the conversation as we would in a real conversation. However, various devices work to make this experience feel authentic. First, the interaction takes place on the reader’s smartphone and thus on a device with which they will likely take part in the digital communicative methods that the app exploits in their daily life. The use of the full motion video feels like a real Skype or FaceTime call and the notifications mirror messages that readers would receive from any other app and appear alongside notifications from real people such as text messages or emails. Thus, the Karen experience exploits and blends into the user’s everyday interaction with their mobile device. Overall, then, the familiarity of the linguistic interaction, the way in which Karen responds to the reader’s input, and the accustomed conventions of digitally mediated communication on which the app relies are

designed to make the reader feel as though they are in dialogue with the fictional character Karen.

The empirical study

In order to investigate the way that readers responded to the *Karen* app, I undertook an empirical study of the app in 2017 as part of the Reading Digital Fiction project[2]. The study aimed to investigate responses to interactive digital narratives that play with the boundary between reality and fiction. The research methodology is situated within and contributes to the emerging paradigm of reader response research in stylistics which, as Whiteley and Canning explain, is "characterised by the application of … [reader response] datasets *in the service of stylistic concerns* in order to contribute to a stylistic textual analysis and/or wider discussion of stylistic theory and method … [and] enables the testing and development of stylistic methods and theories" (73, emphasis original). What distinguishes reader response research in stylistics from other forms of empirical literary research therefore is both the commitment to close textual analysis – be that the primary text and/or the reader data – and the use of reader-response research in the development of stylistic theories, methods, and analyses.

The study involved 20 participants (32-76 years of age) who were members of five established book groups in the North of England. Participants were each asked to experience *Karen* individually and then meet up in their respective book groups to discuss it. In terms of media experience, all the participants read fiction on a regular basis and were competent smartphone users. Very few of the participants played computer games regularly. Only two participants declared that they had read a digital fiction app before, but app-store reviews of *Karen* indicated that very few people had experience of this kind of fiction before they encountered the app either. The digital reading experience of the participants thus matched that of the more general *Karen* app audience.

The study was designed as a "naturalistic" (Swann and Allington) empirical study which seeks maximum ecological validity by always presenting texts in their original form, using readers' discussions about texts in their usual environment – typically a book group at someone's house or café, or online discussion –, and using minimal researcher intervention (i.e. the researcher is not present during the discussion). The participants were given relatively modest and unobtrusive instructions in terms of what to discuss in order to reassure

them that I was not looking for any right or wrong responses. I expected that participants would comment on the protagonist Karen but they were explicitly invited to discuss: the story experience as a whole (i.e. the story itself and also the experience of experiencing the story on a mobile phone); the main character Karen; their relationship to Karen; and anything else they would like to talk about.

Because of the discursive nature of book groups, naturalistic studies generate verbal data that is almost always analysed via qualitative methods (e.g. Peplow et al.; Bell et al. 'Immersion'). In the *Karen* study, the book group discussions were audio recorded and then subsequently transcribed. The datasets were coded for emerging themes using NVivo, which is software that facilitates qualitative data analysis, with data within relevant themes subsequently analysed linguistically. In this chapter, I present some of the results from the systematic thematic coding of the data, focussing on the ways that readers responded to the second-person interaction. In terms of the methodological approach to the data, I draw on Bortolussi and Dixon's psychonarratological distinction between "reader constructions", which are "subjective and variable mental processes" (37) as responses to the text and "textual features", which are "objective and identifiable characteristics of the text" (37). I argue that analysing reader's verbal reports (i.e. "reader constructions") about a particular text can show empirically how that narrative has been experienced and conceptualized and thus how particular textual features are responsible for that experience (cf. Bell et al. 'A Reader'). This study was also conducted within the context of reader response research in stylistics. Thus, insights from reader responses are used to test theories and, where they do not account for the phenomena, modified or new theory developed. In the *Karen* study, the result is an empirically grounded understanding of the relationship between readers and an ontologically playful and ambiguous storyworld that is created by an interactive digital narrative as well as a new typology of narrative 'you' that can be used with interactive digital media.

Analysis: "Are you you?"

Across the reading groups, participants remarked on the fact that they could be themselves or they could play a role and they had extensive discussions about whether they were responding to Karen authentically or not. This kind of debate is represented by an extract from Group A's discussion:

LAURA[3]: You know what I mean? I don't know if it's me or not

NANCY: ‘Cause there are so many variables. ‘Cause that comes right back to who you are when you’re interacting with it

ANNIE: Yeah

NANCY: You know, are you you? Are you someone else? And throughout it, you’re probably lots of different people actually

LAURA: Well it depends

NANCY: Sometimes you're you, sometimes you're //

KIM: // It’s funny that you two said that thing about not knowing quite who to- quite which character to play … ‘Cause I didn’t think that at all

ANNIE: yeah I thought I was just me

KIM: yeah I was as well (A, 821-835)

In this example, Kim and Annie report that they are themselves throughout the entire experience. They do not perceive that they are playing a role, but are authentically themselves at all times when interacting with Karen. On the other hand, Laura and Nancy suggest that their position switches throughout the experience. Nancy’s question, “You know, are you you?” is notably in its use of the second-person because it shows the ambiguity and flexibility of the pronoun. The first “you” in this case is used as a discourse marker to signal the beginning of Nancy’s point and is intended to refer to the other participants collectively at the immediate point in time. The second “you” refers to each of the participants individually in the abstract and the third “you” to an authentic “you” that they could potentially be performing when they are interacting with Karen. The referential multiplicity demonstrates that some participants sometimes feel that they are authentically being themselves and sometimes they are not. There is a recognition then that participants switch throughout the experience, depending on the context and, potentially, the questions that they are asked.

It is important to mention also that while Karen addresses readers in the second-person, some of the multiple choice questions present options that include ‘I’s. Thus, readers are not only asked to identify with the ‘you’s in the text but also some of the ‘I’s. Yet, in order to even entertain the possibility of being one of the ‘I’s, readers have to accept that at some level that the ‘you’s are aimed at them.

In terms of role-playing, readers across the groups noted that they could not always authentically adopt the position invoked by 'you' because the options available to them did not allow them to do so. For example, Tracey says: "I would have answered something else but wasn't given the choice" (C, 76) and David that he "ended up an- giving an answer which was the least worst option rather than the one that I would have given" (D, 438-9). In these cases, the interactive function of the text precludes identification with the 'you's in the text because the options available do not appeal to the reader. These readers thus have to adopt a role – as opposed to representing themselves authentically – because a position that represents them is not available.

While some participants felt compromised by the lack of choice, others liked the fact that they could play around with their role:

> WILL: what I liked was that it did – it forced you into a consciousness of how you positioned yourself with Karen
> LILY: Yeah
> WILL: //So
> ROSE: //Yeah
> WILL: When she asks you what shall I do, you have to think … am I going to answer what I would answer, it's … as if – yeah … As if I believe – as if Karen is a person, or am I gonna answer as if I'm in a story and I want her to do the thing //that's gonna get her in trouble (E, 46-57)

Will suggests that there are two options, and these depend on whether he pretends the interaction is real or whether he plays along with it as fictional. If it is real, he would answer one way – presumably in a philanthropic way – but if he decides that this is a fiction, then he can do what he wants and, for him, that would be doing something that would get Karen into trouble – presumably something that he would not do to someone in real life. In this case then there is something very freeing about the referential ambiguity of 'you'. It could be an authentic 'you' as Will in the actual world or it could be 'you' as a fictionalised version of Will in the storyworld.

While Will appears to enjoy or at least tolerate playing with different roles, others across the groups did not appreciate being characterised by the 'you' and thus rejected the attributes

associated with it for three different reasons. Firstly, some readers felt forced to make choices they did not like. Elaine, for example, explains that she felt "irritated 'cause there wasn't an answer that I wanted to give, so it forced me to give the answer I didn't want to give" (B, 95-96) and Lily that: "I didn't like being told what to say, I think, I found that difficult, like I didn't like being – having to choose from set phrases that wouldn't reflect how I would speak" (E, 1083-4). Rather than uncritically adopting the "you" or the associated "I" options, both Elaine and Lily find the positions annoying or uncomfortable and it taints their experience of the app. Here, then, the interactivity within the app does not appeal to the readers' sense of self. They cannot be authentic and that bothers them.

A second reason for readers rejecting the 'you' position was the fact that readers felt characterised in a way they did not like and thus they objected to the way the app depicted them. Adam, for example, states that "There was a lot of assumptions made about who you were and even with the … questioning … I didn't react very well to those assumptions" (E. 16-19). The third reason for rejecting the 'you' was that participants found the 'you's imposing and uncomfortable. Debbie, for example, reports that: "I found the whole process rather uncomfortable and intrusive, and actually I found it forced me into positions that I didn't want to take because the options I was given were none of the options I wanted to make" (C, 28-30). For Debbie, the 'you's were "uncomfortable and intrusive" because they forced her to take a position that did not authentically reflect her perspective. Crucially, while she implicitly rejects the characteristics associated with "you" and the associated "I", she feels pushed into embodying them. She must participate to continue through the text. Likewise, others in a different group, express concern about the role they were being asked to take on:

> DAVID: Well it's putting us the reader… in quite a difficult situation
> LINDA: Yeah, 'cause she was doing sort of ambiguous stuff
> DAVID: Yeah
> LINDA: Saying, should I, shouldn't I
> DAVID: Yeah
> LINDA: Getting us to support her in a way (D, 829-836)

David comments on the moral and ethical challenge associated with the second-person address. He feels that he is put in a difficult position – not just by the answers he gives – but simply by being asked to answer at all.

Overall, the data shows three different positions in relation to the second-person address: (1) sometimes readers felt that 'you' authentically represented them – I define these as 'authentics'; (2) sometimes readers willingly adopted a role-playing position because they wanted to experiment with what might happen if they choose a particularly controversial answer – I define these as 'role-players'; (3) and sometimes readers objected to being addressed as 'you' because they felt that the 'you's did not represent them, but they had to select an option to continue through the text – I define these as 'rejecters'. Importantly, readers can move in and out of these roles throughout their encounter with the text; they might feel like themselves at some points and decide to role-play at others[4].

Theorising 'you'

Existing theories of narrative 'you' can explain the responses shown in the data above to some extent but, as the following discussion will show, amendments are needed to capture the readers' experiences in their entirety. Primarily, because *Karen* is an interactive text, readers are compelled to willingly or reluctantly assume the role of 'you' if they want to continue through the text. Karen asks readers questions and the narrative can only progress via a response from the reader. All readers are thus placed in what Espen Aarseth (1997) calls "a cybernetic feedback loop" (65) with the text/machine, a process specific to interactive media, in which "information flow[s] from text to user" via the modes of representation the text deploys "and back again" (65) via the interactive functions the reader is asked to perform. The multiple choice questions are the most important feature in terms of putting the reader in dialogue with Karen because if readers want to continue through the text, they have to respond to her questions but, if they respond to those questions, they implicitly become the 'you'.

While the concept of the cybernetic feedback loop is valuable for modelling how digital reading works in general, it does not account for the diversity of the participants' responses and also the fact that some texts can invoke more than one addressee at the same time. David Herman's five-fold typology of narrative 'you' was developed in relation to print fiction, but it offers a means of categorising the different ways in which the second-person can be used in

fiction across media by classifying individual instances of 'you' according to whether they refer to fictional or actual entities as well as entities that are a combination of the two.

First, Herman's category of "actualised address" which he defines as "an address that exceeds the frame (or ontological threshold) of a fiction to reach the audience" (341) refers to 'you's that apparently invoke the reader of a fiction. This type of 'you' accounts for the responses of 'authentics', such as Annie and Kim above, who claim that they felt they were being themselves in the interaction. They were not playing a character in the fictional world but instead they perceived the 'you's as addressing them directly.

Second, Herman's category of "double-deixis" is a form of 'you' which "produces an ontological hesitation between […] reference to entities […] internal to the storyworld and reference to entities […] external to the storyworld" (338). Herman's use of "hesitation" implies that the referent of 'you' moves back and forth between addressees. However, Herman also describes double-deixis as a "blend" (342), a "hybridized combination" and, more frequently, a case of the "superimposition of deictic roles" (345), terms which suggest that 'you' is both actual and fictional at the same time. Conceptualising 'you' in this hybridised way accounts for the fact that readers inevitably notice the intended address to them but, because 'you' also refers to a fictional character at the same time, they will not be able to identify with the 'you' completely. Instead, as Herman observes, the reader will find themselves "more or less subject to conflation with the fictional self addressed by you" (345) with the composition not necessarily half-fictional and half-actual but instead can feel more fictional or more real. Thus, this form of 'you' addresses two addressees at the same time.

Both the participants who played a role deliberately – the 'role-players' – and participants who did not feel addressed by 'you' at all – the 'rejecters' – are still the intended referent of the 'you's in *Karen*. However, the reference is not completely successful because neither group fully identifies with the qualities associated with those 'you's. Both recognise that the 'you' in *Karen* refers to a fictional entity that is not them. However, because all readers of the app are involved in the cybernetic feedback loop, they are also assigned the role of 'you' in both actual and fictional worlds. Herman's referential framework can thus be utilised here to say that rejecters feel the conflation of double-deixis in terms of its intended reference to them, but they refuse to take up the position and role-players accept the double-deictic

reference, but they do so knowing they are playing a role and that the ‘you’ is blended, referring both to them and a fictional character at the same time.

Combining Herman’s typology of narrative ‘you’ with Aarseth’s cybernetic feedback loop provides a medium-specific means of explaining the data above and could also be used to analyse responses to ‘you’s across other digital texts. However, from a reception perspective, it does not fully account for the fact that readers can be comfortable with or resistant to a second-person address. Modelling the reader’s adoption of or resistance to ‘you’, Jill Walker adapts Irene Kacandes’s (‘Are you’, *Talk*) account of ‘you’ in print fiction to show how readers of digital fiction specifically can be positioned by the second-person. Drawing on Austin’s speech act theory, Kacandes suggests that when an apostrophic ‘you’ is used in a text, it offers the reader an “irresistible invitation” (‘Are you’ 139) to project into it. While Kacandes argues that ‘you’ is supposedly “irresistible”, she also notes that readers cannot actually identify with most cases of fictional apostrophe because the characteristics of the ‘you’ given in the text will rarely match those of the reader completely. As a special case of apostrophe, she defines “literary performative” forms of ‘you’ as those that cause readers to inevitably perform what they are reading and thus inevitably position the readers as ‘you’. As an archetype of a literary performance, Kacandes provides the example of “you are reading this sentence” (*Talk* 183) in which readers are referenced by the ‘you’ simply via the act of reading. This, she says, “contrasts with the … deliberate will to identify with the ‘you’ of apostrophic talk” (*Talk* 183) in which readers can choose to identify with ‘you’ or not.

The fact that Kacandes uses a hypothetical example as the archetype of a literary performative is significant because, while she analyses several examples of ‘you’ that initially fulfil the criteria of literary performative in postmodernist print fiction, she also acknowledges that “literary performatives rarely occur in pure form i.e. as a statement that absolutely any reader can actualize by reading” (‘Are you’ 148). This, she explains, is because readers are unlikely to be able to identify with a fictional ‘you’ once attributes are attached to it. Yet, while literary performatives are rare in print fiction, because the reader is involved in a cybernetic feedback loop in digital fiction, literary performative ‘you’s are used quite ubiquitously in digital texts. From this point of departure, Walker suggests that Kacandes’ literary performative must be subdivided to account for different kinds of ‘you’ in digital fiction. First, some ‘you’s function as “involuntary performatives” – also found in print – which, as in Kacandes’ original concept, the reader performs just by virtue of reading

a verb that corresponds to an activity in which they are engaged such as "reading" or "clicking". Second, some 'you's result in what Walker calls "forced participation" by making it impossible for the reader to continue in the text unless they adopt the 'you' role thus physically perform the process described or required by the text. Examples of this are when a reader has to respond to an onscreen question or manoeuvre an avatar in a digital storyworld.

The new 'you's

Walker's framework provides a valuable means of distinguishing between 'you's that readers inevitably perform just by reading them (involuntary performatives) and 'you's that readers have to embody if they want to proceed through a text (forced participation). However, her framework does not cater for responses to 'you' that are evident in the participant data above in which readers identify with the 'you's and thus willingly participate as themselves – what I have defined as the 'authentics' – or where readers willingly adopt the role of 'you' as an experiment and/or simply for fun – some of the 'role-players'.

I therefore add two new categories to Walker's medium-specific typology, drawing on Herman's referential framework to show how each 'you' works ontologically. First, my new category of "authentic participation" accounts for responses to 'you' in which readers feel and act like themselves as opposed to playing a role. These readers respond to the 'you' as a form of actualised address and thus regard the 'you's as apostrophic. My second new category of "voluntary performative" accounts for responses to 'you' in which readers willing play a role. In the *Karen* data, this accounts for responses in which readers deliberately choose answers to second-person questions in order to see what happens and can be contrasted with Walker's "forced participation" category in which readers unwilling adopt the 'you' position, simply so they can continue through the text. Incorporating Herman's theory into these categories, unwilling role-players, who have to respond to the text if only to continue through it – leading to "forced participation" – feel the conflation of double-deixis in terms of its intended reference to them, but they refuse to authentically or faithfully take up the position. By contrast, willing role-players, who "voluntarily perform" the 'you' role, accept the double-deictic reference, but they do so via consciously playing a role. Readers who "authentically participate" as the 'you' respond to the second-person as a form of actualised address because they see the 'you' as genuinely referring to them. To complete the framework, 'you's that generate an "involuntary performative" (e.g. "you are clicking" or "you are reading") are also

caused by forms of actualised address because the reader becomes the 'you' simply by reading them, even though they have not necessarily consciously chosen to do so.

Figure 1 shows the way in which these four categories function by plotting the relationship between the degree to which the reader feels coerced into participating as 'you' and the degree to which the 'you' has fictional as opposed to actual qualities.

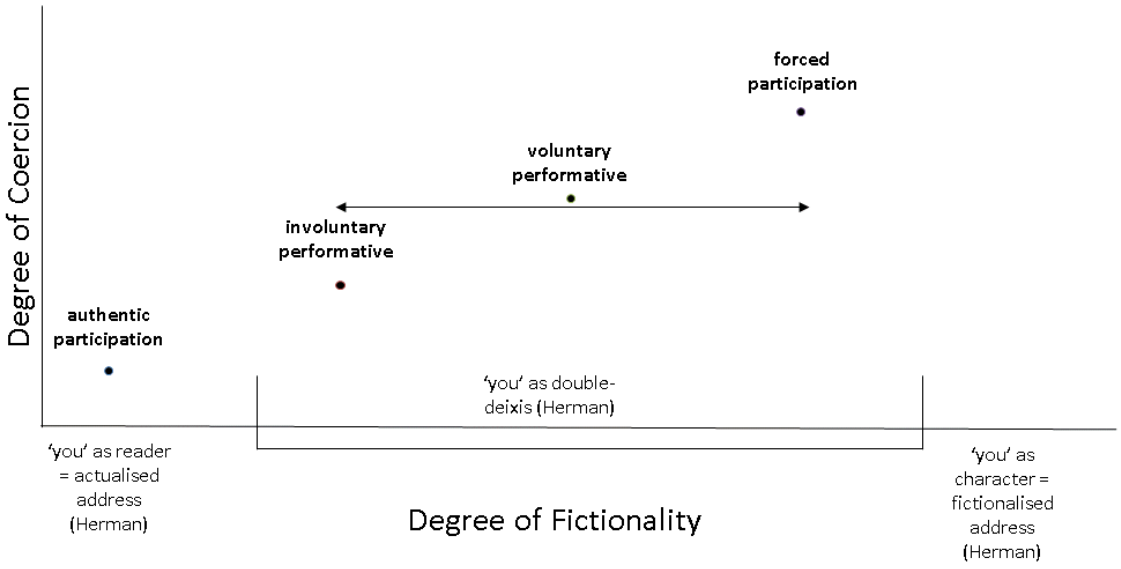

Figure 1: medium-specific typology of reader-responses to 'you'

As the graph shows, the new category of "authentic participation" is situated on the lower end of the degree of coercion because the reader does not need to be persuaded to be 'you' – they simply feel it is them. The degree of fictionality is also low because they do not feel like the 'you' is fictional. Neither category, however, sits at zero on either axis because something – a text – has to exist to make the reader feel like 'you' and thus they are coerced by something to a certain extent and the 'you' can never represent them comprehensively so a small degree of fictionality is inevitable.

An "involuntary performative" shows some degree of coercion because readers who perceive a 'you' in this way have not willingly decided to assume the 'you'– they have been assigned that role via the inevitability of the language. However, because the language refers to

something they are doing – such as “reading” or “clicking” – this category is placed nearer to the ‘you’ as reader on the fictionality scale.

A “voluntary performative” has a greater degree of coercion because the reader has to be convinced to perform that particular role. Since readers are also playing a role that could be more or like them, this category could be placed on various points along that axis and this is represented by the double-headed arrow on the diagram. For example, for the readers in the *Karen* data who said they were playing a role for fun, the voluntary performative would be placed nearer to the ‘you’ as character. Finally, “forced participation” is shown to have high levels of coercion because the reader does not feel like they are the ‘you’ in this case. Instead they embody the ‘you’ only because they have to, in order to continue through the text. This category also sits near to the ‘you’ as character on the fictionality axis because the reader cannot participate as ‘you’ authentically.

For completeness, the diagram also shows “‘you’ as character = fictionalised address” on the *x* axis which represents cases where the ‘you’ cannot refer or stops referring to the reader and thus falls outside of the actualised/doubly-deictic scope. This would be in cases where, for example, a character talks to her/himself using ‘you’ and thus the reader recognises that the intended referent of the ‘you’ is not them.

It is important to emphasise that, while some ‘authentics’ claim to be being themselves during the entire experience, the reader cannot always be themselves because there will almost certainly be times where the ‘you’ does not represent them authentically and they will either move into a forced participation or voluntary participation role-play position. These roles should therefore be seen as positions that readers shift in and out of during a reading experience. Indeed, these positions will almost certainly shift from episode to episode in *Karen* if not question to question. In the reader data above, participants talk quite generally about whom they were in the interaction and it is difficult to attribute their forms of participation to specific parts of the text. This is an unavoidable consequence of a naturalistic method which involves minimised researcher intervention text. An alternative protocol that asked readers about a particular part of the text would offer data of that nature.

That said, there is some evidence of participants commenting on specific parts of the narrative, rejecting the characteristics ascribed to 'you' in these cases. Annie, for example, notes precisely where her strong reactions emerged: "When she came on and she had the file out and she was saying like you're this and that I was like no I'm not" (A, 504-5). What is particularly pertinent here is that Annie's response is generated by part of the text where the reader had no interactive role and therefore no agency at all. In one of the extracts above, Annie remarks that she was being herself in the experience. However, in this particular case, Karen gets it wrong and it is the inaccuracy that leads to Annie feeling irritated.

Participants from Group E also commented on a different scene that generated a lot of frustration for them. In this case, readers were asked to choose between different objects on screen. Once they've made their selection, Karen then responds by telling them what their choice says about them. Group E collaboratively responded as follows:

> LILY: //That – see that's – the – the bit where I knew I was being fucked about with … was choose between the bangle, the deer or the camera and at that point I was like
> ADAM: Me too … It's the first time I got really annoyed
> LILY: Yeah
> ROSE: Yeah, I was
> LILY: //Me too
> ROSE: //Very pissed off //at that
> ADAM: //'Cause I chose the camera and then I was told that I was a creative person //or something
> LILY: //(haha)
> ADAM: I was like, this is fucking nonsense, I chose the camera because I don't want a bangle
> ROSE: Yeah
> Adam: Or an eighties reindeer thing (E, 162-190)

In this case, the participants are affronted by Karen's response to their selection. While they seem to have authentically participated in the request, they resolutely reject the resultant qualities associated with the 'you', thus moving into the 'rejecter' position and forced participation. The strong feelings of rejection reported by some readers are often tied to

specific to distrust of and/or incredulity about Karen's ability to deliver a competent therapy session.

Indeed, in both Group E and Annie's data, the participants are responding to parts of the narrative in which Karen is trying to psychologically profile the reader, so these are instances in which she is trying to be a life coach and thus do her job as opposed to asking the reader to help her. However, these appear to be so notable for the participants because Karen clearly makes inaccurate assessments. In sharing the intimate details of her life with her clients, Karen is clearly a terrible life-coach. However, the participants seem to be able to tolerate this as long as it does not lead to inaccurate or inappropriate psychological profiling.

Conclusion

The second-person is used ubiquitously and often playfully throughout digital fiction. In *Karen*, it places readers is a dialogue with the protagonist and asks them to reflect on whether they are comfortable or even willing to embody the second-person pronoun. While in print fiction, readers can distance themselves from a 'you' by assuming that it is talking about someone else, in any digital fiction that asks a question using the second-person, the cybernetic feedback loop compels readers to willingly or reluctantly participate as 'you' if they want to continue through the text.

The reader response data shows three different responses to 'you' – what I have defined as 'authentic', 'role-player', and 'rejecter'. This chapter has also shown that existing typologies of 'you' are effective at determining its referential potential and some reader responses to it. I have found empirical evidence for Walker's "involuntary performative" and "forced participation" categories and used Herman's typology to analyse the referential potential of the second-person. I have shown, however, that to capture responses to 'you' comprehensively, two new categories are needed: "authentic participation" which accounts for responses to 'you' in which readers feel and act like themselves as opposed to playing a role, and "voluntary performative" responses to 'you' in which readers willingly and deliberately play a role. My new medium-specific typology offers a reception orientated approach to 'you' by acknowledging both reader responses to and the ontological status of the second-person address in digital fiction. While I have focussed on the medium-specifics of digital fiction, medium needs to be taken into account in any examination of 'you' in fiction.

At a broader methodological level, this chapter has shown the value of empirical research for stylistics, narratology, and literary studies more widely by profiling the way it provides access to a range of reader responses that would not be possible to achieve with introspective analysis alone. It allows existing theories to be tested against reader responses and new theory developed where the data cannot be accounted for. This chapter demonstrates how discourse analytical approaches to reading group responses can yield substantive insights into perceptions of narrative 'you' and provides evidence of a number of new categories of reader response. While these categories have been developed from the *Karen* study, future research could test the extent to which these categories apply to readers of other digital texts that employ narrative 'you' as well as readers of 'you' narratives across media.

The reader response research has revealed some ethical implications associated with a 'you' address. Whether the readers of *Karen* felt willing or not, they found themselves in dialogue with Karen and thus with helping someone who was evidently vulnerable. While this is a fictional encounter, the feelings that it generated are real. In this regard, this interactive text explores the epistemology and ontology of the digitally mediated society in which many of us currently live. In what turns out to be the last episode in the app – but which readers are not warned will be the last interaction – a camera pans around Karen's flat, which is now empty. All of her items have been removed, as though she never existed or else she has left never to return. Without warning, the reader's relationship with Karen is over. Implicitly also, she has taken with her all of the reader's responses to her questions and thus any personal information that they have given. Readers not expecting Karen to disappear may feel disappointed, shocked, manipulated, or tricked. Ultimately, the digital technology through which they interact with *Karen* is the very thing this fiction teaches them to be cautious about. It models the way in which we might readily give out information about ourselves in digitally mediated communication with people that we don't know and/or whose ontological status is unclear. Thus, while Karen is fictional, her conversations with 'you' can feel very real.

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[1] I use the term ‘reader’ to describe the person who interacts with the *Karen* app. While there are ludic, interactive elements in the text that make it game-like, the term ‘reader’ is meant to capture ‘reading’ in the generic sense of the way that we ‘read’ text, images, sounds, and interactive interface elements.

[2] Reading Digital Fiction was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK (Funding Reference: AH/K004174/1), www.readingdigitalfiction.com

[3] All participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

[4] There will also be readers who choose not to finish the app – i.e. they start using it and give up. This is a different, but potentially overlapping, category to readers who feel some resistance while they are reading it. A discussion of readers who choose not to finish the app is beyond the scope of this chapter.