

Grand Text Auto Exhibition Proposal Beall Center for Art and Technology

1) Contact Information

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2) Project abstract

While many popular blogs have become books, we propose to work with the Beall Center to — for the first time — move an influential blog into the gallery.

Online, *Grand Text Auto* is a blog with more than 150,000 visitors a month, collectively authored by six artists at the cutting edge of digital games and narrative.

Offline, *Grand Text Auto* has never created a group presence in physical space, though as individuals the members have been shown in major art museums, been written about in leading national periodicals, and shipped games that have met wide acclaim and sold millions of copies.

3) Project description

Something is shifting in our culture. While experiments in digital media have been pursued for decades, we have finally reached the point where interactive forms can no longer be considered marginal. We have seen bloggers come to rival newspaper columnists in political influence, while computer games have come to rival feature film economically, and the list goes on.

Yet digital forms remain in their early stages of development, perhaps most obviously in the area of computer games. While the game industry has huge economic reach, culturally it is mostly aimed at the narrow "hardcore" demographic important to the initial economic success of many games. An NPD Group study recently confirmed what many suspected about this hardcore demographic: it is mostly 6-17 year old boys.

But the potential for interactive digital forms is much greater than the fulfillment of boyhood fantasies of power and violence. The members of *Grand Text Auto* are some of the leading artists exploring these greater possibilities, especially from the perspectives of story and character — two of the most prominent elements of media that matter to adults.

Story and character can't stay the same as they move into digital forms, lest the results be middling examples of the same audience experiences available in other media. And to move game forms forward we must defamiliarize them, we must make them visible culturally, rather than focusing on the incremental alterations in form highlighted by industry marketing. These ideas provide the common foundation for the artists in *Grand Text Auto*, who otherwise take their explorations in widely varied directions, working with a diverse group of outside collaborators.

As we conceive the exhibition, when visitors enter the gallery the most prominent works will be two installations. Mary Flanagan's [*giantjoystick*] recreates the classic Atari joystick of the 1970s as a large-scale playable sculpture, inviting gallery visitors to play classic single-player games through collaborative multi-player full-body movements. Noah Wardrip-Fruin's

collaborative *Screen* is an alternative textual game and fiction, played on a large one-wall virtual reality display, creating a new context for well-known game mechanics and a new experience of touching fiction's text.

These pieces employ interaction quite differently, and this diversity of form continues in the exhibition's screen-based works, objects, and performances. Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern's *Façade* is the first true interactive drama, a game experience influenced by *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* rather than violent fantasies. Nick Montfort's *Winchester's Nightmare* is the first "hardcover" interactive fiction — it was published in a limited edition of prepared laptops. Stern's *Dogz*, *Catz*, and *Babyz* point to digital play aimed at exploring relationships (rather than focused on "winning"). Scott Rettberg and Montfort created *Implementation*, the first sticker novel, bringing web-like atomized narrative into physical space. Flanagan's in-process fabric objects use material patterned with well-known game textures (e.g., *Unreal* fire) to create household objects, evoking the relationship between gaming and everyday life in a new way. Wardrip-Fruin's collaborative *Apocalypse* is a narrative card game (based on AI production systems) that tells stories that operate according to right wing apocalyptic logics. Performances of Rettberg's collaborative hypertext *The Unknown* are perhaps the most audience-engaging live experiences to emerge from digital literature, while Mateas's collaborative *Terminal Time* performances create ideologically-biased video documentaries of the past millennium based on audience preferences.

In addition, we plan two small projects to connect the virtual space of the blog with the physical space of the gallery, including a teletype that physically prints blog comments on a long scroll of paper.

Together, these elements make manifest the range and depth of conversation about the future of digital play and narrative that *Grand Text Auto* was founded to pursue.

4) Resume or curriculum vitae for applicant and all participants

See accompanying files.

5) One page itemized budget

See accompanying files.

6) List of equipment and other resources required

See accompanying files.

7) Copy of any matching awards or copy of funding request

One request, to UCSD Academic Senate, for \$14,369 in new equipment specifically to support exhibition (cover page in accompanying files). In addition, UCSD will provide in-kind use of more than \$35,000 of existing virtual reality equipment.

8) Preliminary visual diagrams indicating installation concepts

None yet developed. The only unusual requirements will be for the two installation pieces. *[giant]foystick* might be placed between the entrances, with gameplay projecting against the interior of the wall around which visitors enter, and with a 10' x 10' play area. *Screen* might be placed near the rear of the gallery, with 23' x 10' throw area projecting toward the entrance, and with approximately a 15' x 10' play area.

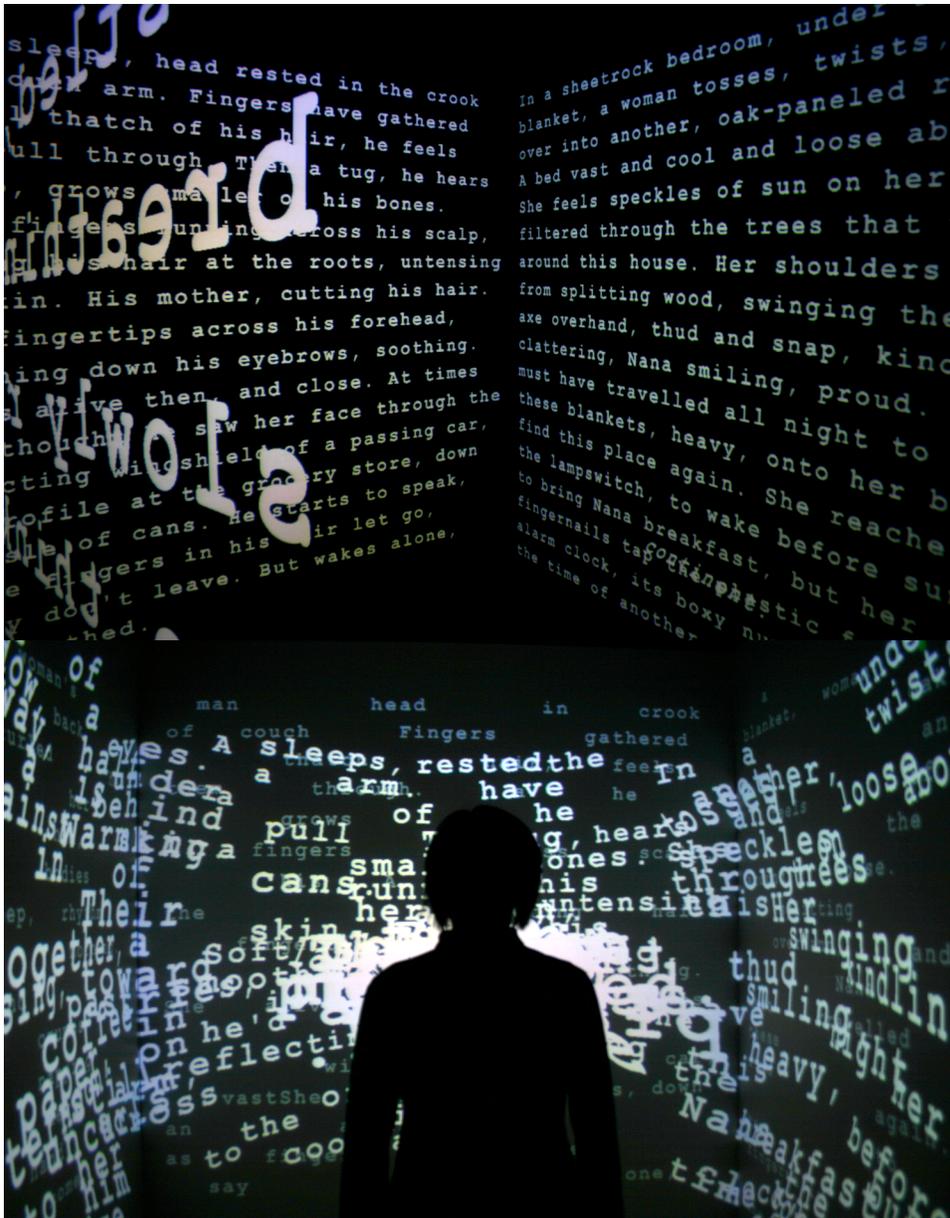
9) Samples of work



[giantJoystick]



Mary Flanagan's *[giantjoystick]* defamiliarizes the classic Atari joystick of the 1970s, recreating it as a large-scale playable sculpture. Gallery visitors are invited to play classic single-player games through collaborative multi-player full-body movements — which require physically standing on the sculpture with a partner — making a new kind of play experience out of familiar games. The results shifts our perspective on these well-known games and, especially, their controller.

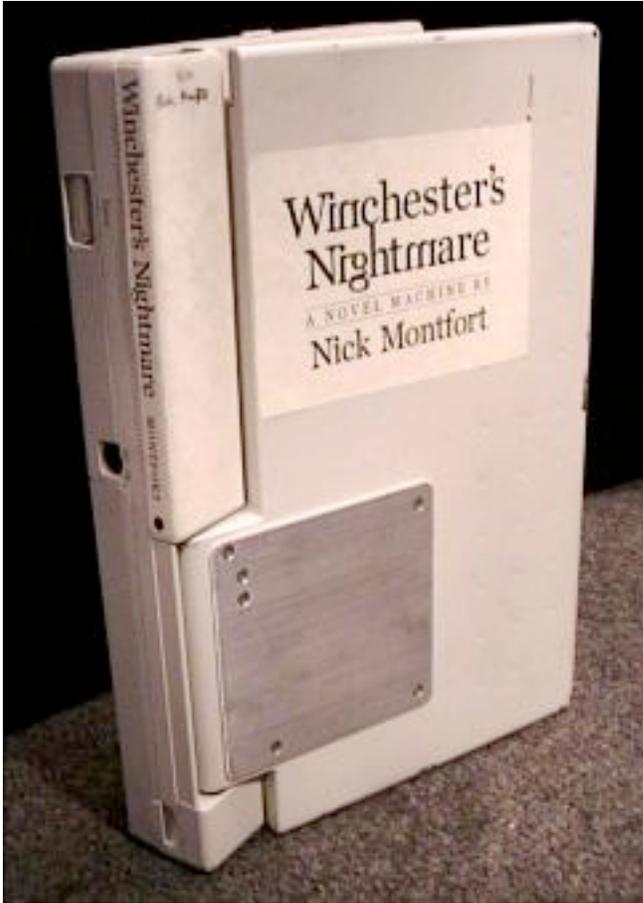


Noah Wardrip-Fruin's collaborative *Screen* is an alternative textual game and fiction, played on a large one-wall virtual reality display. The text of three micro-narratives (each about memory as a virtual experience) begins on the walls, organized into traditional paragraphs. Then words begin to peel loose — at first slowly, then faster and faster. The player/reader can strike words with her hand, after which they may return to where they came from, take a position previously occupied by another word, or break apart. The more actively the audience works to keep these memory texts in place, on the walls, the longer the experience lasts — and the more changed the texts become from their originals. Finally, when too many words are loose from the walls, the rest peel loose and collapse.

Screen creates a new context for well-known game mechanics and a new experience of touching fiction's text. It has been presented as video documentation in exhibitions, but not with true virtual reality display and bodily interaction. Through a combination of in-kind contributions and expected support from a UCSD grant program (see included file) we propose the *Grand Text Auto* show as the exhibition premier of the virtual reality version of *Screen*.

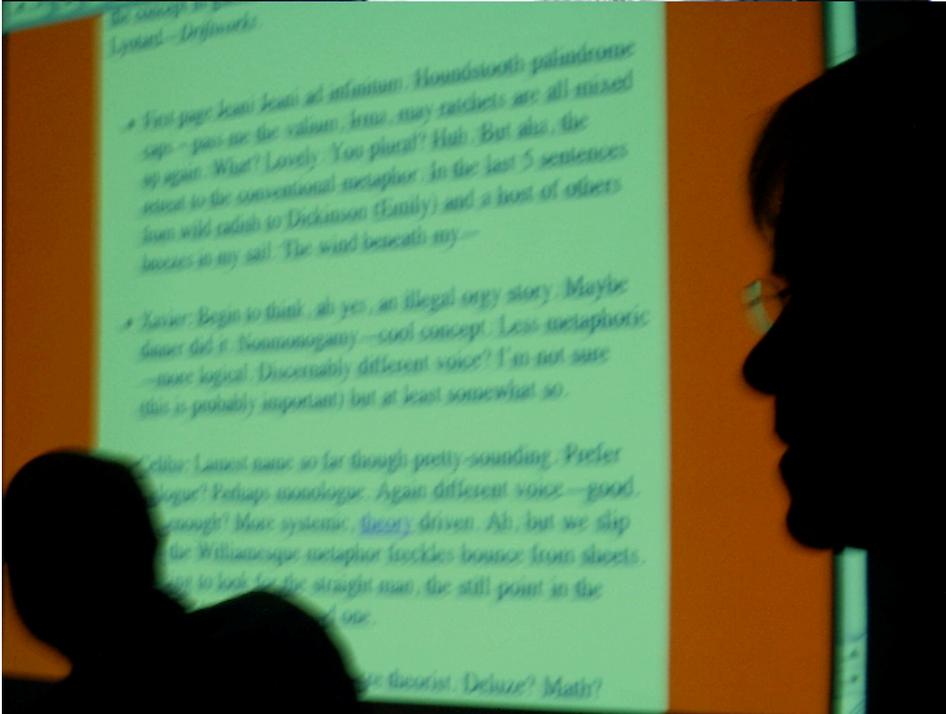


Michael Mateas and **Andrew Stern** created *Façade* — the first true interactive drama, a digital media experience influenced by *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* rather than violent fantasies. Its creation required breakthroughs in artificial intelligence (for characters, dramatic structure, and language understanding) as well as innovative script writing and interaction design. Interactors play a longtime friend of Grace and Trip, an attractive and materially successful couple in their early thirties. During an evening at their apartment that quickly turns ugly, interactors become entangled in the dissolution of Grace and Trip's marriage. *Façade* has been hailed as "the future of video games" by *The New York Times*.

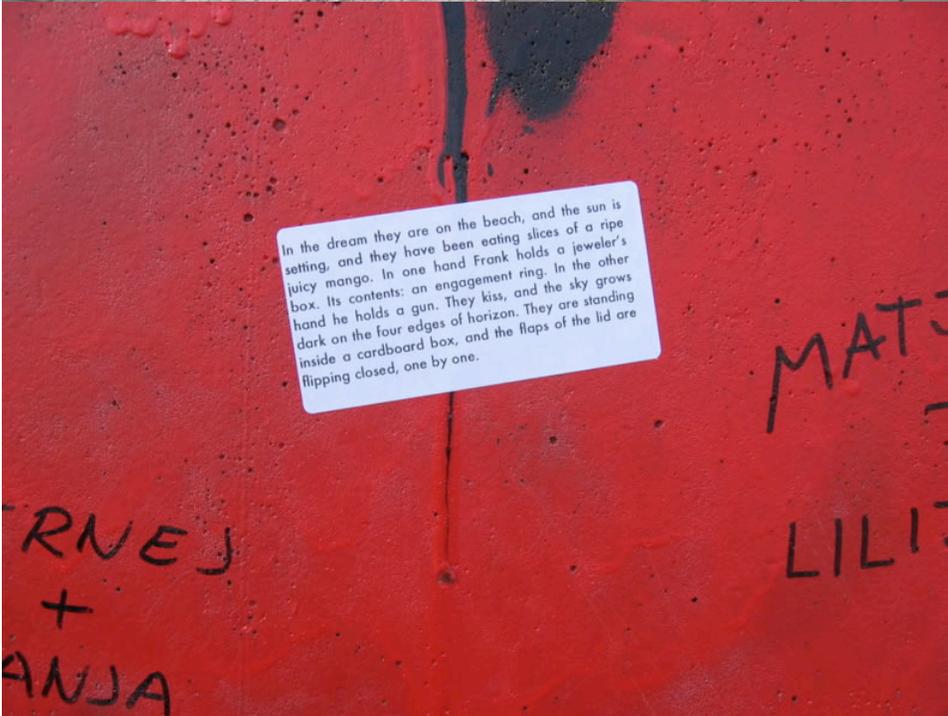


Nick Montfort's *Winchester's Nightmare* is the first "hardcover" interactive fiction — it was published in a limited edition of prepared laptops. The interactive fiction form (also known as the “text adventure”) created some of the bestselling games of the 1980s, especially the products of Infocom (e.g., *Zork* and the game adaptation of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). But the coming of graphical computers to the home, followed by increasingly sophisticated graphical games, destroyed the commercial market for interactive fiction (IF).

But a largely-underground group of writers, game designers, and programmers continue to push the IF form forward, creating new games and even new, freely-available programming languages and development environments. Montfort is among the leaders of this group, both as a creator of innovative IF games and as author of the first academic book on the subject (*Twisty Little Passages*, MIT Press, 2003). We plan to exhibit three of Montfort's IF works. First, the prepared laptop *Winchester's Nightmare*, which alters the traditional IF textual exchange (between game and player) from command/reply to a flow of narration. Second, Montfort's playful *Ad Verbum*, which takes advantage of the game's textual form in order to engage the reader/player in language games inspired by the Oulipo. Third, *Book and Volume*, which casts the player in the role of the system administrator of a computer system that (the player begins to learn) is responsible for generating some of the seeming-reality within which the player must operate. These three will be presented together on one table, with shared paper that exhibition visitors may use for traditional IF-playing activities such as making maps and leaving notes — supporting their own gameplay and that of later visitors.



Scott Rettberg co-created the landmark collaborative hypertext fiction *The Unknown*, the web-based story of the book tour of its eponymous, larger than life authors. The work itself has, in turn, become famous as much for its performances — that is, performances of a story about a series of performances — as for the work itself. The *GrandText Auto* exhibition will feature performance video, an interactive version of *The Unknown*, and possibly additional paraphernalia from the Unknown's simulated cult of writerly personality. We also propose a live performance of *The Unknown* as part of our overall project with the Beall Center.



Nick Montfort and **Scott Rettberg** created *Implementation*, the first sticker novel, bringing web-like atomized narrative into physical space (and then back to the web). The novel's stickers are distributed free of charge. Readers place the stickers in evocative locations, photograph them, and send the photos to the authors. More than 1,500 photos have been submitted from around the world. For the *Grand Text Auto* exhibition we propose to install a subset of *Implementation* stickers and photos on the gallery walls, provide free sheets of stickers, and (if possible) install a larger set of *Implementation* around UCI.



Andrew Stern's ground-breaking interactive characters, created with collaborators at PF.Magic, will also be featured in the *Grand Text Auto* exhibition. Created a decade before current industry products such as *Nintendogs*, Stern's *Dogz*, *Catz*, and *Babyz* point to digital play aimed at exploring relationships (rather than focused on "winning"). After the first of these (*Dogz*) sold more than a million copies and gathered high critical praise, Stern and his collaborators decided to make a bold move. In addition to creating something that broke many of the conventions of computer games, the projects next began to violate the spatial separation that has been seen as essential to games since the 1930s writings of Johan Huizinga. Instead, *Catz* lived on the computer's desktop, creating opportunities for playful interaction around the borders of whatever windows were then open — word processing or email applications, or even other games. Next came *Babyz*, which allowed players to use a microphone to build common vocabulary with virtual characters. These were groundbreaking innovations, with the potential to change our view of computer play, but they didn't result in the kinds of blockbuster profits toward which the game industry had become addicted. As a result, PF.Magic was sold, and no real successor to this innovative work has yet emerged.

As with Montfort's three IF pieces, we propose displaying these three works on one table with appropriate context provided.



Michael Mateas's collaborative *Terminal Time* performances create ideologically-biased video documentaries of the past millennium based on audience preferences. This is possible because *Terminal Time* is a history “engine” — a machine which combines historical events, ideological rhetoric, familiar forms of TV documentary, consumer polls, and artificial intelligence algorithms to create hybrid cinematic experiences for mass audiences that are different every time. Through an audience response-measuring device (applause-meter) connected to a computer, viewing audiences respond to periodic questions reminiscent of marketing polls. These questions occur every 6 minutes during the story. The loudest applause determines the winning answer. Audience answers to these questions allow the computer program to create historical narratives that mirror and even exaggerate the audience's biases and desires. A discussion following the performance helps audiences grasp the inner workings of *Terminal Time's* fascinating and unsettling historical and ideological mechanisms. We propose a *Terminal Time* performance as the other live event (along with a performance of *The Unknown*) in the *Grand Text Auto* project with the Beall.