Writers Are Not Strangers

[1] The contemporary-emerged medium of interactive fiction allows readers, perhaps for the first time in literally history, to have agency over the characters, narrative and choices that are made throughout a story, which had previously solely belonged to the writer. And in having this agency, the story, the reader-writer relationship, and what it means to have both of those identities has changed.

[2] ‘Writers Are Not Strangers’ is an interactive novella by Lynda Clark, both writer and researcher. Her work revolves around humanity's relationship with technology, and the ways in which technology can extend, enhance, and inspire creativity, with this piece specifically begging the question of how technology can alter the boundaries of ‘reader’, ‘writer’ and ‘text’. The story is about Alix, a woman torn between her creative writing dreams, her dying mother, and career responsibilities, while a world-ending meteorite threatens to destroy her world.

[3] You, the reader, choose ‘options’ underneath each chapter that dictate Alix’s narrative and how the story unfolds, with the outcomes being a direct result of those decisions and arising from the combination or accumulation of previous choices. Each time you read the piece; it changes because *you* changed it. [4] You ‘defy’ what it means to be a reader – an observer, a watcher, a passive spectator – and instead become something of a ‘interactor’. That changes your relationship with the main character, the plot, and most importantly, the writer. The writer, both Alix with her online fiction forums, and Lynda Clark herself as the author of the ever-changing piece, become someone other than strangers to you. It’s personal because she (and you) made it so.

Not one reader can have the exact same experiences as another because of how we choose Alix’s narratives for ourselves, and furthermore, we ourselves can never play out the same story if we were to re-read it, due to the choices we made before it.

[5] The piece was made via ChoiceScript, a program that emulates a game-like narrative to stories, and therefore, ‘Writers Are Not Strangers’ has a branch-like structure, with each choice that you make, leading off into a different path, while also referencing pervious choices that you had made at the beginning. [6] It’s structure changes and is dependant entirely on how you want to dictate Alix’s life and react to her mother dying, or how you rate her online blog posts, or even how you name her cat. This piece is constantly breaking the fourth wall by having options that speak directly to you and the fact you are controlling it.

[7] Furthermore, not only do your first choices impacts on the endings, but they dictate the new beginnings that emerge when you reread it a second, third, fourth time; making it infinitely different from traditional storytelling. It invokes that not only are writers not strangers, but this story isn’t just a story: it’s a game; and you are not a reader, you are a player. Through interacting with this online digital fiction, you are changing the traditional concept of readership into something more.

[8] It’s an allegory for modern-day readership impacting on writers and the relationship between the two depending on how a reader interacts with a writer’s work. This work further commentates of the emotional response writers have to readers making choices. At first, your choices are only referred to in passing, but subsequent textual interventions will be referred to with increasing directness, until eventually the reader/player is forced to confront their impact on all areas of Alix’s life, encouraging them to consider the effect of their responses to other creative works in this new-aged era of authoring and readership.

[9] How can it be possible to explore the same thesis of changing the established reader-writer relationship with contemporary interactive fiction that is *not* dependant on readers making story choices? What are the ways in writer we, as digital writers, can explore other aspects of digital fiction to alter the partnership between ourselves as authors and our writers to emphasise that writers are not strangers?