

Aim, fire and explode: the dangerous languages of *The False Unlimited*

Abstract

The False Unlimited was created, in part, as a response to a world where language is used and weaponised for political, commercial and social ends. Extending my creative practice of transforming game engines into poetic and artistic experiences, this work examines how the visceral nature a shooting/bombing game interface can be used to “destroy” these nefarious phrases. The article examines both my intentions as an art-game creator, as well as my creative and technical processes for building the work. It examines how experiments into art-game making must consider a range of factors, including the impact on readers, the difficulty of reading interactive work and the power and hinderances of various “texts” (sound, movement, image, interface). This exegetical essay combines an internal poetry with the games poetic intentions and situates this work as one of many experiments “to be continued and expanded”. The end result is less about a finished work, or clear conclusions and more about the forever process of making and breaking the metaphors and textual experiences inherent in games engines and weaponised language and visual play. Three levels will eventually lead to four more of an entirely different work, as what was learned here is applied and blown apart, occasionally poetic.

Keywords

art-games, gaming, explosion, digital poetry, electronic literature, digital art, political, language, jargon, interactive art, visceral

A summary of sort

Hint-ish: *distance from the cannon equals power*

Read- Aim- Fire- Read

Sometimes the fit between a digital artwork or art-game and an exhibition's stated theme can be tenuous. In the hopes of being exhibited, artists will surf the edges of their artwork's original meaning, attempting to find tethers to the curator's call for work. At times I've dipped into this practice of meaning-stretch. However, for the 2020 ICIDS exhibition, *Texts of Discomfort*, curated by María Cecilia Reyes and James Pope, my work truly feels like a perfect fit. Indeed, the title of the exhibition, had it not been already crafted by Reyes and Pope, would have been the perfect title for my art-game, which this writing describes.

The False Unlimited (2020) is an interactive digital poem/art-game hybrid exploring the dangers and drama inherent in the "death

of truth" in political and social systems. Over the past three years leaders have gleefully and willingly lied, diverted, distorted and deranged facts, science and the social contract of a common good. They have done this, largely, through language and the use of repetition and a torrent of false and misleading narratives. These are very much, in a direct way, discomfoting texts.

Using a shooter-based game engine with timer-generated explosive spheres, *The False Unlimited* allows readers and players to shoot at these phrases and language. They destroy the words used by political leaders: missives that mislead the public and fog scientific and factual narratives. Each of the levels of *The False Unlimited* explore different political narratives, from climate change, environmental/wildlife protection, corruption, tax cuts for the rich, divisive/attacking language and tyrannical tendencies.

To experience the work, the reader/player/users shoot these spheres at specific

screen locations. When the sphere timer ends it explodes, and if aimed well, the phrases are destroyed and scattered across the screen. Visually the work uses a mix of hand-drawn and net-art style, with heavy explosions and the splattering and scattering of text across the screen. The more phrases that are exploded, the more chaotic and concerning the screen composition becomes. And with each explosion new phrases are formed, breaking and dispersing language, creating alternative narratives, deter-

mined by the reader's play and interaction. In essence, *The False Unlimited* is a visceral and cathartic digital poetry game that allows those who find the language of leaders and politicians maddening, frustrating and shocking, the chance to explode those frustrations and break apart dangerously and intentionally false narratives.

1

THE FALSE UNLIMITED

Loading - 100%

next text(s)



A difficult reading experience?

As a creator of digital poems and interactive fictions, many of which use game creation software, there is an often-uncomfortable handshake (pandemic edit: fist bump, elbow nudge, foot tap) between the ease of *how to play/read/experience* and the goal/focus/hope of the writer/artist. Readers of digital writing typically understand and are used to reading with links and clicks. They understand mouse/finger/eye/screen movement and arrow keys and swipes. These are modes of reading we have become accustomed to engaging within: interactions with expectations attached and experiences anticipated. Therefore, there is a danger in creating digital works of fiction that attempt to move beyond easy or pre-accessed graphical user interface constructs, such as my browser-based literary game, *The False Unlimited*, which specifically uses the interaction techniques associated with a first-person shooter game.

This is not a conceptual danger (although one might exist), nor a poetic obstacle, or thematic worry. Instead, the danger lives within the mode of engagement for the reader/player/user: those with less experience in digital games and gaming culture may not be as comfortable with, or might not have previously engaged with, an interface devoted to aiming, powering, shooting and exploding. This has been my experience when presenting this work to publics over the past year. Often, the anecdotal experience is that they are not as familiar with the combination of movements, the screen physics or the textual targets of a 'shooter engine', and have not internalised firing a weapon as a cohesive and metaphorical interactive reading experience. The question is, then, where is the line between thematically necessary difficulty and reader expectations? How far can a writer/artist go in building a new(ish) style of interface, a new(ish) mode of interaction, before they begin to lose audiences through a reading that is more

difficult than the payoff provides?

Inherently, I am risking the reader failing to experience my work simply through their lack of ability to interact with the work. Jesper Juul, in 'The art of failure: An essay on the pain of playing video games', describes this risk as a central feature of game playing, "...failure is an integral element of the overall experience of playing a game, a motivator, something that helps us reconsider our strategies and see the strategic depth in a game, a clear proof that we have improved when we finally overcome it" (Juul, 2013). For *The False Unlimited*, the answer to the questions regarding the line between readability versus interface innovation is unclear, murky and forever changing. Juul implies it is less about the line and more that games, and in this case art-games, will always involve some amount of unreadability. As Juul writes "Failure brings about something positive, but it is always potentially painful or at least unpleasant. This is the double nature of games, their quality as

"pleasure spiked with pain"." (Juul, 2013, p.10).

Therefore, yes, there is a danger of losing reader/player/users. They might attempt to read the work and then back away, the pain more powerful than the pleasure. Their mouse might move erratically, pointing and clicking without intent, and become annoyed, confused or simply uninterested in knowing what happens when the power is applied, the weapon is aimed, the trigger is pulled/clicked and the resultant bomb explodes the texts into literary shrapnel. Others might find the visual and auditory noise inhabiting the interface an immediate impediment, preferring a less chaotic and explosive approach to writing/reading (a point revisited later in this article).

Conversely or inversely, the work's frenetic appeal might gain readers. The work's overall thematic approach of exploding the language, breaking apart dangerous and ill-conceived/received language might attract those who adore the mixing of adrenalin and the literary



or the merging of kinetic trajectories with the de-construction of language. And from that the player/reader/user gains a type of agency, or as Thi C. Nguyen described in *Games: agency as art* (2020), “when we play games, we take on temporary agencies-temporary sets of abilities and constraints, along with temporary ends” (Nguyen, 2020, p.5). Thus, briefly they gain a new ‘power’ to explode, de-frame and re-frame sentences and phrases from the public sphere. They gain a type of temporary control over

the languages through their game interaction. And perhaps these readers will even interweave their previous experiences of first-person shooting games with *The False Unlimited's* reading, breaking, re-reading, re-breaking process, and generate a personal game genre of their own making/aiming/firing.

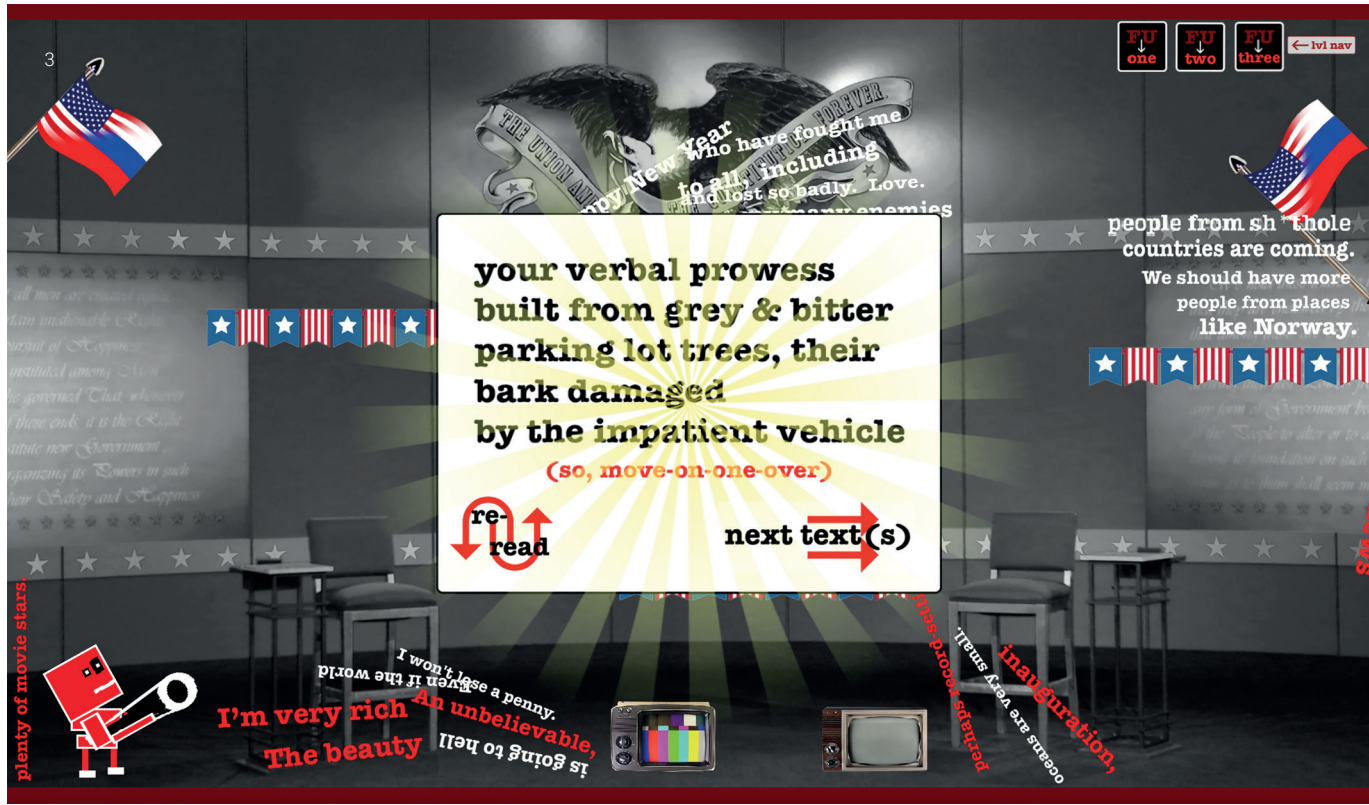
Weapons and explosions as rewriting bomb grammar: visuals, sound, and interactions

Aim, fire, wait, explode. Aim, fire, fire, fire, fire, wait, explode, explode, explode, explode!

In pure function there isn't a substantial difference between a mouse cursor moving words around the screen, and a launched bomb

exploding those letters outwards, crashing and colliding. Both are offering the reader/player/user the ability to adjust and re-organise texts, sentences and phrases. Both are techniques for deconstructing language and reordering it for meaning/meaninglessness. Using a mouse, the reader/player/user has a control that's refined and more exacting. A specific word can be pushed away, the remaining sentence re-grammared by touch. The movements are slow, casual and largely uneventful. The concept of re-orde-

texts of discomfort



ring language is more important, in the case of a cursor driven interface, than the reader/player/user's experience. By focusing on the ordered meaning and conceptual focus, the experience is more aligned with a traditional writer process: craft words, rethink their order, recraft the poetry.

However, when using a bomb, fired from what resembles a weapon-of-sorts, waiting for an explosion to transform words in shrapnel, a viscerally kinetic experience is created. It begins with an intent, aiming for an area of the screen populated with language. One then estimates the power needed to launch the bomb to the required space, physics, gravity, trajectory become reading/writing processes. On firing the reader/player/user is rewarded with the sound and movement of a small round bomb lofted to a coveted spot.

And yet, I am creating an unreal visceral moment for the reader. The launching of bombs

and the firing of weapons for literary purposes is not a normal lived experience, indeed it would likely result in a range of social and legal consequences should a suburban reader attempt such an explosive poetic approach IRL. Astrid Ensslin describes this aspect of videos games as Unnatural Narratives: "the unnaturalness of games enables us to escape into realms of what's normally thought to be humanly impossible or unthinkable" (Ensslin, 2015, p.53). And after a short countdown, one, two, three, four, the bomb explodes. The sound is a well-worn media memory, this is what an explosion sounds like. Then a shockwave crashed into the language, propelling it around the screen. Once again physics, gravity and trajectory become critical vehicles for experiential reading of this digital poem.

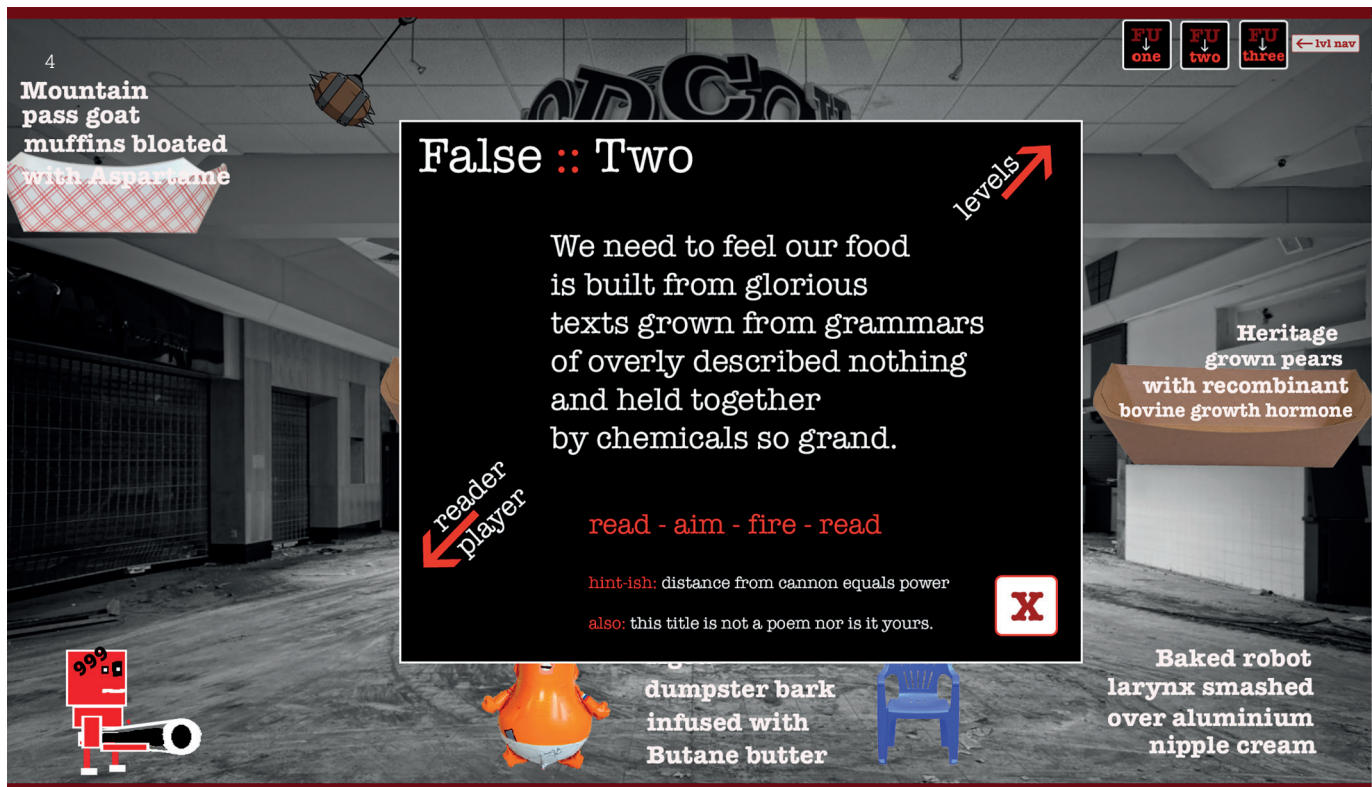
And yet the "text" that connects all these elements, the most immediate artistic element and literary vehicle, is the interactive sound. Audio triggers (pun intended) and grounds the

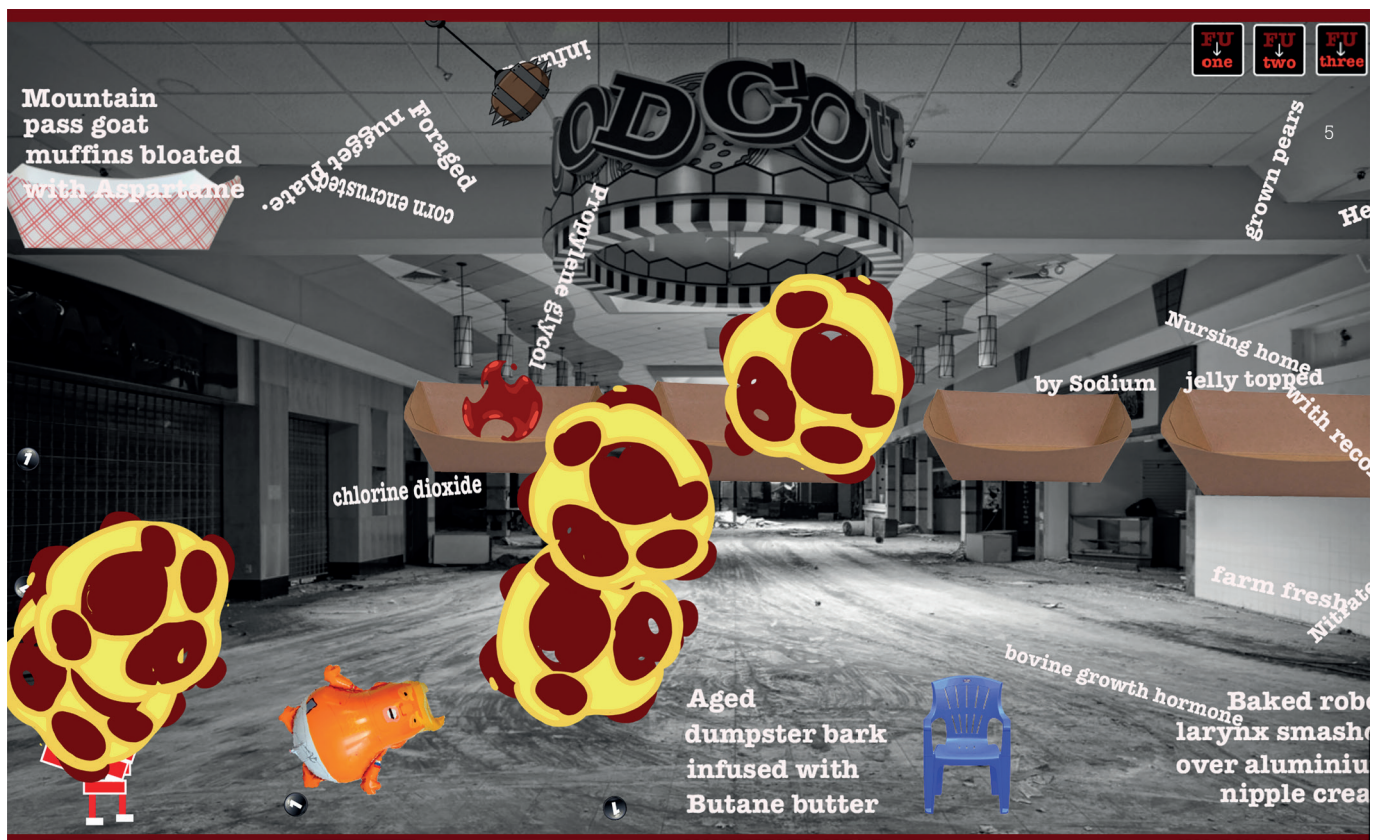
reading process and rewards the reader/player/user with an immediate hit of meaning and sensorial response. Karen Collins in her article 'Playing with sound: a theory of interacting with sound and music in video games', explains sound in games as being unique from sound in other, less interactive, media:

sound is fundamentally different in terms of our experience from listening without in-

teracting; that there is a distinction between listening to sound, evoking sounds already made (by pressing a button, for instance), and creating sound (making new sounds)... (Collins, 2013, p.2)

For the writer/artist, interactive or triggered sound is also an arrow of sorts. The reader/player/user does something in the artwork, they press and fire. Sound then becomes an agreement between the art/poetry game and the





player that things are working as they should. The reader/player/user is directed to fire again and again and the literary meaning of the exploding words is concreted in their heads. Again, typically, the sound of an explosion has a relatively agreed upon auditory definition, which is then used as a literary device, a sound-based arrow to a type of visceral meaning.

Almost immediately the reader/player/user begins to replace meaning with experience. The intentional crafting of slow textual movement/placement is lost in the crashing, banging of flying texts and colliding objects. But then again, perhaps it's unfair to delineate the reading/writing experience from the craft of language. After all, the explosive processes in

this work are not the same as detonating and demolishing a tall building, exacting dynamite, a floor-by-floor collapse of steel, wire and stone. What remains after the reader/player/user explodes language is not piles of lettered rubble, not unreadable chunks of font and ideas. Instead, the language remains, re-ordered, re-stacked, concrete poetry built by explosions.

In many ways *The False Unlimited* is both an art-game and a concrete poetry generator. As Scott Rettberg explains in his book *Electronic Literature*, “the precursor to interactive poetry is kinetic poetry and the precursor to kinetic poetry is concrete poetry” (Rettberg, 2018, p.27). Thus, this work occupies a genre with a long trajectory. Indeed, one version of this work, unmade as of yet, allows readers to easily and immediately generate screenshots of the game space. While the kinetic and interactive elements are critical and central to the meaning of *The False Unlimited*, the intersections of texts/

words after and during being exploded and moved and colliding is where the work’s poetry lives.

And the future-feature of image creation will add credence to the work’s concrete poetry roots, as building an interactive kinetic/concrete poetry generator was a primary goal in making *The False Unlimited*. The language the reader/player/user targets, fires on and then breaks apart, comes from negative spaces, is language representing some of our species’ worst textual utterings. The phrases, created for political and social manipulation by hollow self-aggrandising creatures, then become intersections of visual and textual meaning.

The levels as they are

False :: One

Because Idiotic and Attacking and False sloganesque language can win the presidency with the help of criminal everyones.

While the impact on US politics and discord and public language has been massive, I am slightly embarrassed the first level includes and then destroys language from the 2016-2020 US President. The echoing and expansion and continual debate about this individual's daily words and proclamations made those words more real and more powerful than was warranted or desired. And including those words here, in an art-game, even one whose goal is to viscerally and entirely explode and collide and re-construct that language, is a type of echo and continuation. For that I internally and externally am, in some ways, saddened.

Having said that, it was my frustration and at times anger, then others bemusement, that spawned *The False Unlimited* into existence. Language, slogans and messaging has always been used to control and attack and brainwash populations. But it was shocking to many (or hopefully most) how easily this person's words were consumed and believed. More disturbingly, those words were translated into actions and made enemies of neighbours and spurred millions to follow false narratives and egocentric diatribes. Therefore, the idea of birthing an art-game targeting that damaging language and allowing for readers to burst it apart, reforming it into twisted, visually caterwauling jumble of half-phrases turned concrete poetry was, and I suppose is, very appealing.

End False :: One

*Your Verbal prowess built from grey..
Next Texts*

False :: Two

We Build to Feel our food is built from glorious texts grown from grammars of overly described nothing and held together so grand. (also: this title is not a poem nor is it yours).

My current life (as of 2021) is one stretched from Australia to Norway. But my past existence was within the confines of the USA. Oklahoma, to be specific, the land of shopping malls and large box stores. Capitalism and its close-close partner consumerism were dominant belief systems. Daily we were pummeled with advertisements and packaging, a forever swim of color and logo, best and new, ingredients to better lives through preservatives and flavourings. I adored, as a child, trips through the grocery aisles, each boxed or canned or plastic wrapped food-like manufactured collection of substances (also known as “items”) was a win-

dow into a manipulative world, wondrous in its promise.

I recall taking my niece into one of these giant, heavily stocked, stores. We wandered into the fruit and vegetable section and, thinking I could transform this grocery store visit into a teachable moment, said she could pick any fruit she wanted, no matter how strange or expensive. I expected she would choose a wildly shaped Star Fruit, or perhaps a large spikey pineapple. Instead, she somehow zeroed in on what was labelled as a “Grapple”. Initially I marvelled at the cross-seeding/breeding skills of horticulturists (or geneticists). How did they combine grapes and apples into one magical fruit?! Sadly, as we drove home my niece read from the fruit packaging’s small print. They were not some magic of fruit-gene-splicing or happy result of a Star Trek style transporter cellular re-combination accident. Rather, a “Grapple” was created by injecting artificial grape flavouring into an

otherwise normal apple. Eating this made-up fruit left a taste in the throat similar to a dissolved aspirin soaked in expired vinegar.

Level two of TFU explores these marketing tricks and pseudo-scientific, entirely manipulative languages and substances used by food-like product manufacturers. Curiously, I found that, at times, after the food marketing language was exploded and broken apart, it reformed, via collision and landing and re-orienting, into other real, yet previously unknown,

grocery store item phrases. The fire-aim-explode generated poetry I had assumed would be surreal and absurdist was instead accurately, if accidentally, reflecting the actual, 'real', world. Unfortunately, I remain struck and swayed by food marketing language, albeit in a far more limited way than my Oklahoma youth. Its manipulative power shines a small poetic heart on a plastic and chemical-filled edible experience.





End False :: Two

... and bitter parking lot trees, their bark damaged... Next Texts

False :: Three

Either we do not care or we do not understand language used per day should not be so empty and without flesh, it dissolves as ant sand into the closest colony (also: details are the veins and something about the sun).

The detest of daily small-talk is a well-worn trope among intellectuals and artists. Many of my collaborators, friends, mentors and mentees often cite their dislike of casually meaningless banter and conversation. Yet, after a long conference, you find yourself waiting for vegetarian goulash and overhear those same individuals deftly using their small-talk skills when engaging with restaurant staff. Even when one attempts to circumvent the empty discussions of days and weather and wellbeing, that new

language quickly becomes lost. In essence, we, as humans, want to talk to each other, want to communicate, want to interact. But we do not want to grapple with the responsibility and care needed to actually listen to each other, and to uncover a helpful response from our brains. We are, as the title of this level suggests, engaging in ant colony banter, quick communications to keep the line going, and the daily life process moving with as few incidents and involved interactions as possible.

When making an art-game with multiple levels, there is often an evolution of creative play with the interface. New techniques and possibilities arise within the constraints of the game physics and interactive rules/controls. For the third level I made the choice to dominate the screen with text, reflecting the dominating nature of daily small-talk. Then I created dividers for the targets needed to explode the texts. These dividers mirror how isolating mea-

ningless conversation can be, and how language meant to connect and interact, actually can, instead, further separate us from each other, and real interaction. Once the bomb is dropped into the correct section, the language then falls into the lower level, clumping and colliding until all sections are exploded.

End False :: Three

...by the impatient vehicle (so, move-on-one-over). Next Texts

Technical Bits

Art-game makers are often good/bad at breaking things. The notion of breaking, at least in the creative practice sense, involves removing a thing's ability to complete its original intended task. John Sharp, author of *Works of game: On the aesthetics of games and art*, explains the rethinking of game objects, engines and systems is a common method for art-game creators (Sharp, 2015). They are, after-all, rethinking an existing digital-based genre, remaking it for purposes beyond the technology's original intentions of entertainment or commerce or simply commercial gain.

Many art-games begin by borrowing from what is already possible within a technical/software/code context. A creator uncovers a method for moving a creature forward/backwards, combines that with the code needed for enemies and obstacles, and the result is in-

teractive art or writing. Among the many examples of this is the serious/art-game *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009) by Braxton Soderman. The game uses a simple click and walk interaction, common in many platform-style games. However, the simplicity of the game controls is intimately connected to the game's overall focus/theme, a social critique of suburban life. The everyday monotony changes in unexpected ways after small choices are made. Soderman (2010) suggests,

one could focus on describing the potential meaning of their aesthetic transformation of a common game mechanic, perhaps leading to an analysis that focuses primarily on the medium specificity of the videogame. (Soderman, 2010, p.3)

Thus, a borrowed game interface becomes a moment of transformative experience.

FU one FU two FU three ← lvl nav

words fail me / wakeup call / seize the day / scared to death / mark my words / live and learn
rags to riches / panic button / pain and suffering / no pain no gain / labor of love / knock on wood
jump the gun / ivory tower / high as a kite / green thumb / force of nature / facts of life
easy as pie / down to earth / dog and pony show / cry me a river / crash course / cold shoulder

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texts of discomfort

com or Codepen.com. The result is dozens of folders, .zip files and half-made works, each uncovering an array of possibilities with the game interface. The contents of which are asking and attempting to answer the questions: What I can make? What kinds of game-based techniques can I explore, then break and rethink for an artistic or literary purpose?

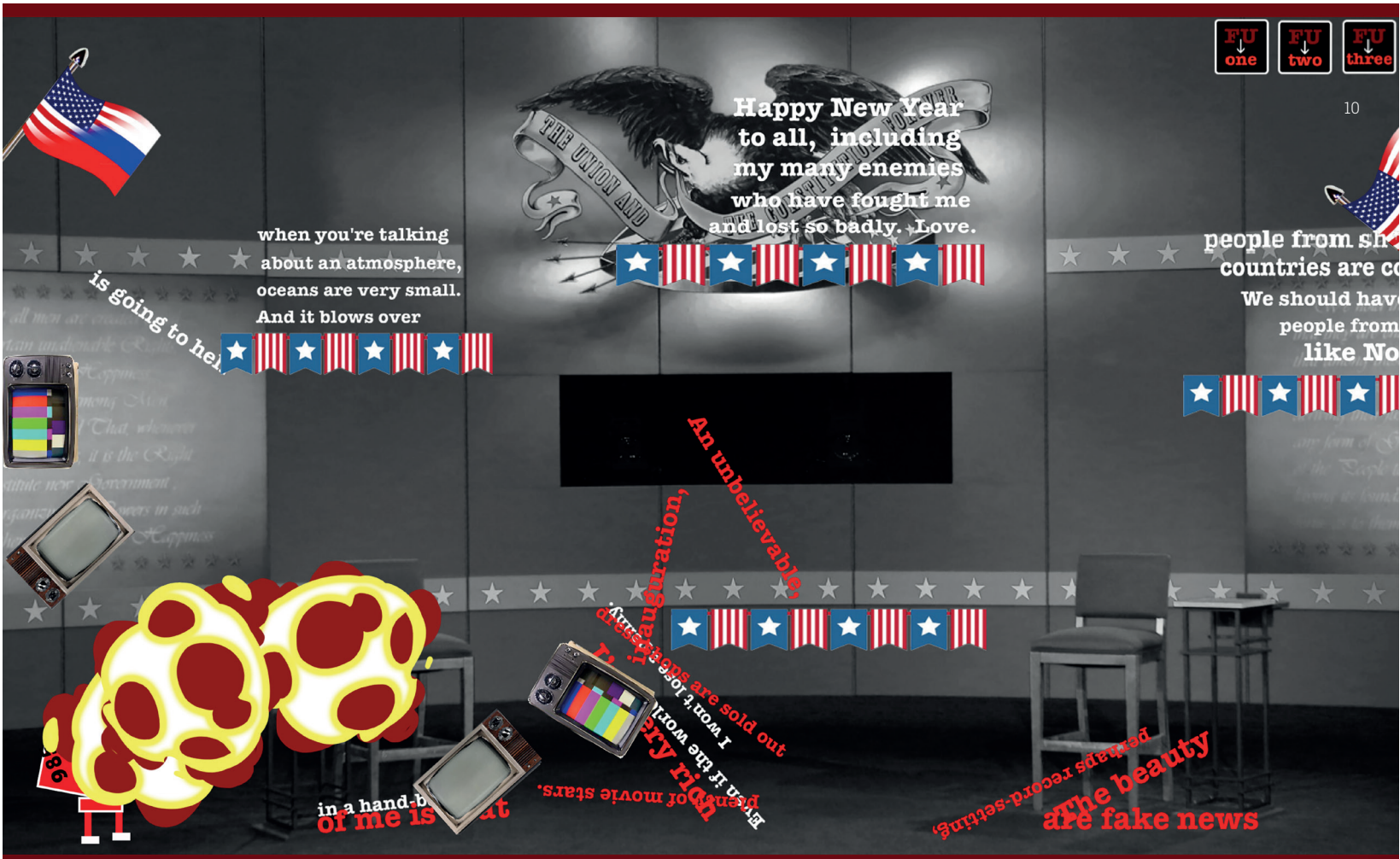
Doing this requires what I call *code mining*. Using an array of keywords and search metadata I dig through open-source databases and other net-based collections sharing Creative Commons license JavaScript libraries. Naiyana Sahavechaphan and Kajal Claypool, developers of the *xsnippet* coding tool, explain a similar process:

this largely unwritten, yet standard, practice of “develop by example” is often supported by examples bundled with library or framework packages, provided in textbooks, and made available for download on both official and unofficial web sites” (Sahavechaphan & Claypool, 2006, p.1).

The result of this “develop by example” approach is an inevitable intersection and interplay between the mined code and the resulting art-game.

While not too dissimilar from a painter using purchased brushes and paints with their specific colors, viscosity and bristle weights, there is the added factor that some effects or interactions might not be possible in a given code-set, or might be preferenced in a JavaScript library. Perhaps more importantly, code and programmable technologies change far more quickly and with a greater range of difference and technique possibility than more traditional artistic tools. In the case of *The False Unlimited*, much of my exploration of code to create this art-game came on the anguished wave of the death of Adobe Flash.

Flash was, for over a decade, my software of choice to create interactive art, digital writing and poetry as well as numerous art-games. As Anastasia Salter and John Murray detail the history of the artistic use of Flash in their book *Flash: Building the interactive web* (2014), Adobe (previous Macromedia) Flash was for many



FU one
FU two
FU three

10

Happy New Year
to all, including
my many enemies
who have fought me
and lost so badly. Love.

when you're talking
about an atmosphere,
oceans are very small.
And it blows over

people from sh
countries are co
We should hav
people from
like No

An unbelievable
inauguration,

the sold out
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perhaps record-setting,
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is going to hel



the genesis of their art-game practice. It allowed Salter and Murray to build interactive, non-linear, multimedia, multilayered art-games within a relatively inexpensive and semi-easy to learn software package. However, due to circumstances better explained elsewhere, Flash was destroyed by corporate decisions and therefore those artists who worked with the program were forced to rethink the tools they used, and, in many cases, their entire artistic approach. Therefore, to create this work I explored using a range of other HTML5 and JavaScript tools that allowed for the building of games in a web environment. And, frankly, I am uneasy with settling on a single software or code solution in making future works, due largely to my concerns around the long-term viability of any particular technological approach.

A type of conclusion that leads to other conclusions

My creative process is a continual evolution. Works are not finished as much as they are released, mutated, reborn, recreated and released again. After a new work is coaxed into the wild, soon after a first version is finished, I ponder, plot and plan other versions and iterations. An interesting and dynamic element of digital art-games and writing is this continual process of rebuilding. For example, writer Kate Pullinger and digital artist Chris Joseph's series *Inanimate Alice* (2005-2016) continuously evolves over time through various episodes and technological developments. Similarly, *The False Unlimited*, while not episodic, will live-on to destroy and explode and adore language in other iterations.

The False Unlimited is, outside of any future rethink, only briefly static. From the first fire, the first explosion, the first flying and colliding texts, *The False Unlimited* becomes something unique, something previously non-existent. Most works of digital art and writing can claim a certain generative quality. But *The False Unlimited* is not so much about exploring a textual landscape and more about breaking one apart. The work needs to be undone for it to be properly read.

And in this regard, in this forever rethinking and remaking, *The False Unlimited* is only the first of many future works using this same interface.

Hint-ish: *distance from the cannon equals power*

Read- Aim- Fire- Read

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Images

1. Start Screen of The False Unlimited;
2. Title Screen of Level One and Introductory Text;
3. End of Level One, Poetic Transitions;
4. Level Two Title Screen, The Language of Food and Consumption;
5. Reading and Playing Level Two, Concrete Poetry Generated Through Collision;
6. Playing and Reading Level Two, The Poetry of Chlorine Dioxide;
7. Title Screen of Level Three, Everyday Language as Dangerous;
8. Reading and Playing Level Three: Gravity as Text Art Generator;
9. Reading and Playing Level Three, Poetry Collects Between the Arrows;
10. Playing and Reading Level Two, Language Exploding and Colliding.

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<https://www.secrettechnology.com>.
<https://www.facebook.com/digitalpoetry>
<https://www.dpoetry.com>

Medium: Screen-based computational Work

Year of Release: 2020

Link to the artwork: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1p1vfNk62u9ttV_Sk-RFPiQp00VtNnb6_/view?usp=sharing

Video artist: <https://vimeo.com/461132362>