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Rubik, the Short Story Cycle, and the Digital Age

Abstract:

In the 21st century, the demands of digital presence and the distractions of the internet simultaneously challenge writers wishing to represent contemporary life and threaten the attention readers are willing to give to literature. In this paper I argue that the short story cycle is a literary form that is capable of representing digital life and does so in a way that extends and expands the way that we read. I take Elizabeth Tan's 2017 book *Rubik* as my case study and my analysis focuses on the way Tan uses two key features of the short story cycle form to represent and simulate life in the digital age. I begin with a discussion of how Tan uses the multiplicity of the cycle form to demonstrate the polymediation of life in the developed world and that the use of discrete, separate stories in the cycle allows for switches in voice and style which not only simulates the polyphony of digital life but also encourages us to contrast the different ways individuals use mobile technology to manage their lives. Following this, I demonstrate how Tan uses the connectedness of the cycle form to create hyperreal nested narratives in *Rubik*, highlighting the blurring of the boundaries between online and offline, between reality and simulation, and in doing so encourages active participation from the reader.

Biographical Note:

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Key Words:

Short story cycles, hyperreality, polymediation, fiction

Introduction

In the 21st century, the demands of digital presence and the distractions of the internet simultaneously challenge writers wishing to represent contemporary life and threaten the attention readers are willing to give to literature. In this paper I argue that the short story cycle is a literary form that is capable of representing digital life and does so in a way that extends and expands the way that we read. I take Elizabeth Tan's 2017 book *Rubik* as my case study and my analysis focuses on the way Tan uses two key features of the short story cycle form to represent and simulate life in the digital age. I begin with a discussion of how Tan uses the multiplicity of the cycle form to demonstrate the polymediation of life in the developed world and that the use of discrete, separate stories in the cycle allows for switches in voice and style which not only simulates the polyphony of digital life but also encourages us to contrast the different ways individuals use mobile technology to manage their lives. Following this, I demonstrate how Tan uses the connectedness of the cycle form to create hyperreal nested narratives in *Rubik*, highlighting the blurring of the boundaries between online and offline, between reality and simulation, and in doing so encourages active participation from the reader.

Definition of terms

A short story cycle, sometimes labelled as a 'novel in stories', is a group of discrete yet interconnected stories. Seminal scholar of the form, Forrest L. Ingram, defines the short story cycle as "a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his [*sic*] experience of the others" (1971, p. 13). Susan Garland Mann's definition elaborates on Ingram's, arguing that the short story cycle has "only one essential characteristic: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated ... the stories work indepenetly of one another ... [but] work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story" (1989, p. 15). As such, scholars identify several formal characteristics that differentiate short story cycles from novels and from short story collections. In this paper I focus on the characteristics of *multiplicity* and *connectedness*. Ingram states: "Every story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole" (1971, p. 19). The formal feature that works to assert the "individuality of its components" I have termed *multiplicity*; the formal feature that highlights "the bonds of unity" I have termed *connectedness*.

Background: polymediation and hyperreality

Media theorist John Corner describes our current media experience as mediatisation, which recognises that we live in, rather than simply consume, media (Corner, 2018). Mediatisation has recognised the effects of mass media since the 1960s, however, and the term predates the internet, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and the ubiquity of the smartphone. In order to account for these advances in technology and our ever-increasing exposure to media, 21st century theorists such as Dunn argue that even this concept of mediatisation must be reconceived:

The modern media experience must be redefined. It is too pervasive to call just ‘entertainment.’ It is too encompassing to call it just a pastime. It is too engaging to just call it a piece of one’s identity. It is too real to call it just fiction. The modern media experience is an evolutionary transcendence, a redefinition of not just what is human condition, but what is human. (Herbig et al. 2014, p. 125)

One way we could conceptualise and describe this modern media experience is through the term *polymediation*, a term predated by *polymedia*. Polymedia captures not only the many forms of technology-mediated communication now available, but what Madianou and Miller call “the profound transformation in the usage of increasingly converged communication technologies” and its “implications for the ways interpersonal communication is enacted and experienced” (2015, p. 170). We now choose among a variety of media technologies to communicate. Different modes of communication carry different social and emotional meanings that are determined in part by the culture at large, and within individual relationships. Polymediation builds on the ideas of polymedia and mediatisation, accounting for the convergence of the mass media we consume and the technology we use to communicate. Polymediation is described by Herbig et al. as, “both the process and product resulting from media producers – who can be everyone and anyone with access – existing within a converged media state” (2014, p. 11). Since the advent of social media and blogging, everyone with an internet connection is simultaneously a media consumer and a producer. This mediatisation and polymediation has contributed to the ubiquity of the smartphone – what Harmon and Duffy have called “the ubiquitous appendage of the 21st century body” (2021, p. 5).

Recent research reveals, unsurprisingly, that our smartphones are distracting us from meaningful pursuits such as study, social events, and leisure itself (Al-Furaih and Al-Awidi 2021; Dontre 2020; Orhan et al. 2021). Harmon and Duffy argue that:

corporations, from retail to social media, colonize our awareness in an effort to mine our interests and keep us tethered to the supply line with the intended goal of keeping individuals imprisoned by their own, oftentimes misleading, misunderstood, or false,

desires ... This external interest in our attention through the smartphone can come at the cost of our presence. (2021, pp. 4–5)

The task of mitigating both our loss of presence and the shortening of our attention spans is a monumental one.

Alienation, isolation, and distraction from leisure and loved ones are not the only troubling outcomes of polymediation. Polymediation generates a profound problem of reality: as we spend more time online, what becomes of our lives? What is ‘real’? Harmon and Duffy’s research finds that because businesses are “merging digital spaces of social connection with consumer activity ... consumers have trouble detecting the difference between what is advertising and what is editorial content” (2021, p. 4). This problem of differentiating the real from the fake is exacerbated by the ubiquity of the smartphone and the increase in how much time we spend online, which in turn means that we spend much of our time in online *spaces*, blurring the online/offline barrier such that there is no longer a sense of being offline at all – often we exist in both realms simultaneously. Hatuka and Toch put it thus:

When walking in a park, one is engaged in juxtaposed spheres: ongoing emails, news sources, work affairs, private conversations, and social networks. By temporarily disregarding one’s physical environment and ignoring the people around, it is expected that the device will take attention and focus. This condition raises questions: how does this state of mind influence social interactions in a place? How does this dynamic shape behaviour in public spaces? (2014, p. 1)

I would also ask: how does this state of dual existence complicate what we think of as the real world? Mark Nunes, writing presciently in the days of Web 1.0, or static web, says:

the Internet does more than network the globe: it creates a metaphorical world in which we conduct our lives. And the more ecstatic the promises of new possible worlds, the more problematic the concept of ‘the world’ becomes. (Nunes, 1995, p. 1)

Since Nunes’s writing, the internet has transformed into a dynamic, social space where individuals are no longer passive consumers of content but create content as well. The internet is no longer a ‘metaphorical world’, but a legitimate space where we conduct much of our lives. Even during the Web 1.0 era, Nunes describes “cyberspace” as ‘a real place with real potentials’, framing it as the:

blurring of the real and the unreal that marks Baudrillard's postmodern moment of the hyperreal. From this perspective, the compelling image of ‘Internet as world’ pushes us

beyond the world, beyond its containment, all the while pursuing the same Enlightenment goals that drove the world beyond its own ends and into hyperreality. (Nunes, 1995, p. 8)

It would seem then, that with the ubiquity of portable digital devices, we are frequently moving beyond the real world into a hyperreal one, where we ultimately have difficulty differentiating the real from the fake, the actual from the virtual, reality from simulation. .

Polymediation and hyperreality in Elizabeth Tan's Rubik

I argue that the short story cycle can reflect the hyperreality of our polymediated lives due to its capacity for chaos and hyperactivity, and its ability to hold multiple, disparate forms. I turn now to Elizabeth Tan's 2017 short story cycle, *Rubik*, which comprises fifteen short stories that explore the intersection of mobile technology, capitalism, human connection, and the nature of reality in the digital age. The stories are not presented in chronological order and involve a rotating cast of protagonists roaming the streets of Perth and cyberspace. In addition to theme and setting, the stories are connected through common images, characters, and events. I will begin with a discussion of how Tan uses the multiplicity of the cycle form to engage with polymediation. Following this, I demonstrate how Tan uses the connectedness of the cycle form to create a sense of hyperreality. Ultimately I demonstrate that Tan uses short story cycle's unique formal properties of multiplicity and connectedness to generate a playful and illuminating exploration of life in the immersive, and often alienating, digital age, and that the cycle form is useful for writers wishing to engage with the digitality of contemporary life.

Multiplicity

Stories in a cycle assert their individuality through difference. The borders of each story allow for multiple diegetic events and formal approaches which, when situated with other stories, aggregate to form a comprehensive collage that cannot be achieved within one, ultimately totalising, story. The stories, while forming part of a larger whole, do not rely on each other to be understood or appreciated but instead simultaneously invite comparison and build resonance. For writers wishing to explore the polymediation of 21st century life, the multiplicity of the short story cycle lends itself as a useful analogy for individual communication acts that may or may not meaningfully connect people. This is explicit in three of *Rubik*'s stories: 'Congratulations You May Have Already Won', 'T', and 'U (Or, That Extra Little Something)'. Each protagonist desires connection, and each of them experiences loneliness and alienation when their desires are frustrated. The cycle's property of multiplicity means that more and different stories can aggregate and amplify these themes and truly enact the way polymediation might bring about such loneliness

and alienation. Furthermore, the use of discrete stories allows for switches in voice and style which not only simulates the polyphony of the mediated world, but encourages us to contrast the ways individuals use mobile technology to manage their lives – and what it costs to do so.

‘Congratulations You May Have Already Won’ is an epistolary narrative wherein the protagonist ‘D’, bored at work and freshly heartbroken, responds to junk email from a sender named ‘l k j v’ who is advertising “Seed” branded products (Tan, 2019, pp. 122–144). It can be inferred from l k j v’s repetitious and impersonal emails that they are a spam bot and that D is being facetious and ironic when he begins his correspondence. Because there are no diegetic elements outside of these emails, that is, nothing that contextualises the events of this story, the reader cannot know D’s reasons for replying to the spam; we can only infer that he is bored, lonely, and critical of consumer culture. However, while this epistolary relationship begins in jest, it soon develops into a sincere expression of desire for human connection. The emails that follow retain some of the initial irony but the tonal shift towards confession and sincerity becomes more pronounced, as seen when D writes: “Whatever your dubious motives, you are by far the most dedicated correspondent I have had in recent memory. Certainly, you are the only one wishing me a beautiful day and to keep up the great job” (p. 127). D himself seems to have been seduced into legitimate communication, allured by the idea of contact and reciprocation. Driven by this need for genuine connection, D begins to reveal personal details, revealing his name and recounting the demise of his relationship with his ex-girlfriend. By continuing to engage with l k j v, despite its being a bot, D is conjuring a confidante, an embodied presence that allows D the illusion of a relationship. Stratton posits that “the instanaeity of email ... provides a sense of closeness, an immediacy that suggests presence” (1997, p. 33). This sense of presence allows D the illusion of this relationship while remaining in control of his life. The communication between D and l j k v is one-sided and meticulously controlled within the confines of the email. Communication, for the polymediated D, might as well be to nobody at all. The embodiedness of l k j v is an illusion that ultimately frustrates D in his search for genuine human connection when he can no longer believe his own delusion. From the beginning of ‘Congratulations’, l j k v, the bot, is a hollow performance of a human being and it is D who, in jest, reads much more into the bot’s performance than is actually there. Perhaps, in this polymediated world, D really has nobody to communicate with: as we isolate and alienate ourselves by managing and mediating our relationships, our social media and messaging apps become redundant when we have nobody left with whom we wish to communicate. The details of D’s life – his breakup with Rach and its aftermath, his waiting room “mind games” (Tan, 2019, p. 127) – suggest that D is profoundly lonely and has conjured a confidante – and that perhaps his energy would be better spent elsewhere. D’s final emails to l k j v express his sadness that the relationship has not lived up to his expectations. The story ends with D’s final email mimicking the spam that instigated the correspondence, and what appears to have begun out of boredom and loneliness ends with D emulating l k j v’s non-humanness:

Hello:
Beautiful day,
d a v e
SCAFNewsletter.2pdf.
(p. 144)

While the story retains its irony, textually D has transformed into a bot, like l k j v. He has revealed himself through his emails but is ultimately frustrated in his quest for connection. The final email suggests that D has been changed by the communication: he too, has become less human in the process.

In ‘T’, the sixth story in *Rubik*, Tim is also struggling to make meaningful connections and is experiencing the alienating effects of polymediation. Tim Spiegel is one of the few characters in *Rubik* that, rather conspicuously, does not own a phone – a rather ironic fact considering that Tim, a voice actor, is the voice of Seed technical support. Tim communicates via email with his client, an artist named Ursula, who commissions him to make recordings for her gallery installation. Unlike D in ‘Congratulations’, Tim’s use of the email form is purely professional:

Hi Ursula,
Please find attached the audio files for your project.
Let me know if there are any problems.
Best of luck,
Tim Spiegel.
(Tan, 2019, p. 76)

As well as being professional, this email keeps Ursula politely at a distance. Like l k j v, Tim’s emails are laconic, revealing little of his personality or emotional capacity – unlike his voice work. Ursula’s responses are less formal:

Hello Tim! Thanks for these! They sound great. I knew you’d be perfect at it. I’ll send you details re: the opening night soon! Take care, U. (p. 77)

By noting the use of exclamation marks in Ursula’s emails, we might deduce that she experiences a more emotional engagement with the communication than Tim. Even though it seems Tim is content to keep the relationship strictly professional, he is acutely aware of the disembodiedness of their communication: “They have never met in person. Her emails are cheerfully incongruous with her artwork. It makes it impossible for Tim to construct any mental picture of Ursula at all” (p. 77). Digital communication has allowed Tim and Ursula to collaborate on a project without ever interacting face-to-face: an exciting and tangible positive outcome of digital communication

but one that keeps the characters at a distance from each other nevertheless. Having seen Tim's name in the gallery guestbook, Ursula emails him and apologises for not saying hello, stating "I'm not quite sure what you look like!" (p. 82). Despite having collaborated together, and their project having a physical presence in the world, the sense of disembodiment and alienation persists for both Tim and Ursula: Ursula knows Tim only by his voice – and still, she only knows this voice in its perfect form. Tim, despite having a voice that is known to all the characters in *Rubik*, is even more isolated and unable to communicate than D in 'Congratulations', as seen when he tries to compose a response to Ursula, but "feels peculiarly unready to communicate with her. As if he is one of her characters, without fingers to type with. Without the privacy of a singular body" (p. 82). While Tim is an enigmatic character, we can infer from the narration, focalised through Tim, that his alienation is partly the result of living in a polymediated world. He cannot simply reply to Ursula, he must *compose* a reply, and does not feel able. He feels he does not have "fingers to type with" (p. 82) and therefore cannot communicate with her, or, it seems, anyone at all.

In 'U (or, That Extra Little Something)', the primary plot is concerned with protagonist Ursula's long lost conjoined-twin-cum-parasite "Rsu" and the mystery surrounding her absence (Tan, 2019, pp. 145–178). While Ursula is not a particularly isolated character, a sense of disembodiment and dissatisfaction with mediated relationships is prominent in this story. The alienating effect of polymediation manifests through one of the story's subplots, when Ursula and her friend Penny become enamoured with Tim Spiegel's voice. Riding in Ursula's car, Penny plays an audio book narrated by Tim:

The reason she listens to these audiobooks isn't because of the stories, but because she really likes the guy who's reading them. His name is Tim Spiegel and it's not that his voice is sexy exactly, or textured with age, but it possesses a kind of melodic orderliness. Like – if it's possible – a voice that is buoyant and sad at the same time; a balloon drifting off in the sky. (Tan, 2019, p. 147)

The voice both young women are so enchanted with is a recording: another form of mediated speech that has been drafted, rehearsed, and edited to create the "melodic orderliness" for their listening pleasure. Considering that the telephone call is a casualty of the digital age (Baron, 2020), it is an ironic twist in the story when Penny's frustration with her lagging Seed.fon prompts her to call Seed technical support where she encounters Tim Spiegel's voice. In some other story, in a world less digitally mediated, this moment would be the meet-cute where Penny actually gets to speak to her crush. As it stands, Penny, like D in 'Congratulations' gets caught up in simulated interaction with, what is essentially, a bot:

Penny is ... deep in telephonic communion, in the corner, her Seed.fon pressed to her ear. She is sobbing... I float over to Penny's corner, watch her dab the touchscreen. She seems

to be pressing the number five. ‘Penny,’ I say, trying to hold her slippery face. ‘What are you doing?’

...

I take the phone, which is spotted with fingerprints and fever-pitch warm. I press it to my ear –

Thank you for calling technical support for your Seed device...

– and I listen to Tim Spiegel, like a gentle firelight, leading me through the telephonic darkness. Penny continues to sob, and even I am overcome with something, like the sun is rising at my back. His guiding voice: melodious, benevolent. (Tan, 2019, p. 154–155)

Penny’s faulty device has enabled her to connect with a recording of Tim’s voice and, rather than selecting a menu option that would connect her with an operator, Penny keeps “pressing the number five” in order to hear Tim Spiegel’s voice on a loop. Ursula becomes just as enamoured with Tim’s voice and then emails him to ask if he would record himself reading something for her installation. His reply, just as in ‘T’, is laconic and professional. Upon reading his reply, however, Ursula feels a frisson of excitement:

My skin prickles with that warm-cold sensation that is almost like love. A concise message, but not an unkind one. I clasp my hands in my lap. I read the message again, which is short enough to take in all at once, like a painting or a haiku ... he signed off with *Best regards* – not just *Regards* – and this little fact is enough to make me hopeful. (2019, p. 169)

While Penny has an emotional reaction to hearing Tim Spiegel’s voice on the technical support line, Ursula experiences pleasure in Tim’s email – not in the act of simply reading it, but in analysing it, reading *into* it, the way D reads into l k j v’s emails in ‘Congratulations’.

As discrete stories, ‘Congratulations’, ‘T’, and ‘U’ all explore the limitations and frustrations of mediated interaction and speak to the loneliness that comes from communicating at a distance. While distinct in form and exploration of disembodiment, loneliness, and polymediation, the beating heart of each story is the characters’ desire and failure to connect with others. The accumulation of these stories, of these characters’ thwarted desires and resulting isolation, amplifies the themes of the cycle as a whole.

It is not only the individual plots that keep these characters from connecting but the formal borders of each discrete story as well. Due to the multiplicity of the short story cycle, we are able to see whom Tim is communicating with in ‘U (or, That Extra Little Something)’ and vice versa. The separation of these characters by the confines of their stories is a unique feature of the short story cycle that enacts the way we mediate our relationships from a distance, despite desiring intimate

connection; the stories themselves are separated and neither Tim nor Ursula are able to connect with the other in the way they would like. In ‘T’, we engage with Ursula not as a human character but merely as Tim’s two-dimensional correspondent: she exists only in her emails and her artwork. Conversely, in ‘U’ Tim is simply a fetishised voice without a body. The short story cycle’s multiplicity allows us on the one hand to see these characters engaging with disembodied, faceless avatars of each other, and on the other hand, reveals these avatar correspondents to have human bodies and desires. This in turn raises the possibility that there is a human behind l j k v in ‘Congratulations’, existing in another story somewhere, but that they, like D, Ursula, and Tim, have been relegated as a correspondent rather than a human being. The differences between ‘T’ and ‘U’ and the distance between these stories, while the characters are still somehow trying to connect with one another within their storyworlds and across the text, is a unique feature of the short story cycle: the disconnection between these stories is as important as the connection.

Just as the formal borders of each story keep the characters from connecting, by comparing these individual stories we see that the characters within them isolate themselves from others, choosing mediated and simulated communication over social participation. When Penny isolates herself from the rest of the partygoers in ‘U’ in order to listen to Tim’s voice repeating the Seed technical support menu options, we can see that this is analogous to D’s engagement with l k j v in ‘Congratulations’. While Penny could solve her problem by connecting to an operator, D could choose to spend his time communicating with actual human beings. Penny’s engagement with Tim’s voice is a simulation of a phone call with a human being – an earnest engagement, with Penny sobbing continuously, her face “slippery” with tears (Tan, 2019, p. 155). While D’s responses indicate that he is aware that l k j v is a bot and not a human, his emails also become earnest. D’s confessional emails are not published as blog posts or presented as diary entries, nor are they sent to random undisclosed recipients as unsolicited email – they are sent to a specific email address, thereby suggesting that D is imagining, against all logic, an embodied presence who is actually reading these emails. D’s dedication to this correspondence is not only indicative of his own pre-existing loneliness, but also exacerbates his isolation from the physical world – much the way Penny’s actions at the party do. A strength of the cycle form is that once we see the way Penny and D become isolated, we can apply this knowledge retroactively to the preceding stories. While Penny and D become immersed in their simulations, Tim’s approach is less explicit. Rather than retreating into emails or simulated conversation, Tim retreats into the work of creating such disembodied simulations. The media these characters use determines the relationships they end up with and, in turn, shapes *them*: D becomes bot-like in his final email, Penny is caught in a loop of recorded menu options, and one of Tim’s only face-to-face encounters with another person involves him performing the Seed technical support menu options for a stranger (2019, p. 84).

These stories demonstrate Calka’s position that mediatisation has altered the way we form and maintain relationships. Each of these stories demonstrates that although the 21st century has us

more networked than ever before, the quality of our communication and our ability to communicate have also been affected. These stories of alienation and disembodiment are individuated through the form, and while they exist in the same storyworld, they do not necessarily connect or coalesce on a diegetic level. The reader, however, can view the stories as pieces of a larger puzzle – or squares on a Rubik’s Cube – and can see the way these characters are trying, and failing, to connect in a polymediated world.

Connectedness

Where multiplicity is the property that, through difference, asserts the individuality of the stories, what I describe as connectedness is highlighted through similarity and repetition. The property of connectedness is concerned with the *explicit* connection between the stories, where the “bonds of unity” (Ingram, 1971, p. 19) are highlighted within the text. Rebecca Cross explains that these “small moments” of repetition activate the reader to make “connections and links among elements of the stories not outwardly explained. This process involves searching for clues and explanations that link different sections of the cycle together and is instigated by the words used within the small moments” (Cross, 2016, p. 35). It is not necessarily the moments in and of themselves that are important here, however, but the fact that these moments are connected at all. The fact that one image, phrase, or moment within one story is connected to another, separate story potentialises a conceptual shift. This shift can occur between the physical fabula of one story world with the digital or conceptual realm of another, for example. Connectedness can suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between stories but, as my analysis demonstrates, often serves to link disparate elements of the text: the abstract with the concrete, the digital with the physical, and the real with the imagined.

The novel, even a fragmented one, offers a continuous context; the connectedness of characters and events in space and time is taken for granted. The short story cycle, on the other hand, is constantly recontextualising. Each story in a cycle offers a new context, both in terms of the formal and the diegetic elements. The shifting contexts of these stories still, however, feature moments of explicit connectedness to the other stories in the cycle. These moments may be experienced by the reader and the characters as *deja vu* and are at turns puzzling and entertaining. In *Rubik*, these moments make it difficult for the reader and the characters to discern the real from the fake, waking life from dreams. The result is a sense of hyperreality not dissimilar to our own experiences navigating our lives online and off. Sherry Turkle describes a group of students that wandered the halls of her university campus in the early 1990s as “cyborgs” who “were always wirelessly connected to the Internet, always online, free from desks and cables ... a new kind of nomad wandering in and out of the physical real” (2012, pp. 151–152). Turkle continues: “compact smartphones replaced the cyborgs’ more elaborate accoutrements. This is the experience of living full-time on the Net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked in others. We are all cyborgs now”

(pp. 151–152). Small moments of explicit connectedness in *Rubik* highlight this blurring of the boundaries between online and offline, between reality and simulation, and in doing so encourage active participation from the reader.

Hyperreality in *Rubik* is brought about by two post-structuralist literary techniques: simulation, things being not-quite real; and embedded narratives, or what Brian McHale would call *mise-en-abyme* and *trompe l'oeil* (1987). These strategies, while applicable to many postmodern novels, are intensified by their application to the stories within a cycle, due to the delineation of the individual stories and the demarcated shifts in context. McHale's description of Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979) applies to Tan's *Rubik*: "the primary diegesis is interrupted so often, by next representations in such diverse media (novels-within-the-novel, films within the novel, still-photographs within the novel, and so on), that the fiction's ontological 'horizon' is effectively lost" (McHale, 1987, pp. 113–114). In *Rubik*, the diverse media include anime series, music videos, memes, advertisements, short films, novels, and fanfiction. To varying degrees, all the stories in *Rubik* are connected or 'hyperlinked' by small moments and hyperreal objects. My discussion will focus on how two characters in the cycle, 'Pikkoro' and 'Mavis Mercury', function as hyperreal objects and challenge the reader's conception of reality.

In *Rubik*, hyperreality is created through the absence of framing and context around individual stories such as 'Pikkoro and the Multipurpose Octopus', which is presented as a story on its own terms: a legitimate storyworld with its own primary diegesis, and not framed as a fiction within a fiction. 'Pikkoro' is the second story in the cycle, where the parameters of reality and primary diegesis have not yet been established. 'Pikkoro' begins as follows:

And here's Pikkoro, in the sudden quiet, on this hot afternoon – sighing over the asphalt, school hat low on her brow. Textbooks add five kilos to her back and ten years to her face... On days like this, Pikkoro's eyes can withdraw so deeply into her head – can resort to oversimplification, express themselves with single lines. (Tan, 2019, p. 6)

What follows is an adventure of a young girl and her octopus friend, Tako. We engage without any prior reference to it being a fiction within a fiction. 'Pikkoro' functions as what Baudrillard calls simulation or a "hyperreal", where "the map precedes the territory", as it is "the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 166). In the case of 'Pikkoro', we have a fictional representation that precedes and replaces the real world itself. We engage with 'Pikkoro' as though it exists on the primary diegetic level of *Rubik*. It is not until the eighth story in the cycle, 'Good Birds Don't Fly Away', that 'Pikkoro' is revealed to be an animated series, when it is abstrusely referenced on the school playground by one of the minor characters: "And then the octopus turns into a helicopter and SMASHES out of the building and THAT'S JUST THE FIRST EPISODE" (Tan, 2019, p. 109). The child's utterance is a reference

to the climax of ‘Pikkoro and the Multipurpose Octopus’ in which Tako “turns into a helicopter, bursts out of the HarvestTime headquarters [and] flies Pikkoro over the countryside and across the river” (p. 24). This small moment of connection between the stories has major implications for the reader’s interpretation of textual ‘reality’. With ‘Pikkoro’ we are initially misled into regarding the story as the “primary, diegetic world”, when it is in fact, a secondary, embedded world (McHale, 1987, pp. 115–116). The “demystification” (1987, p. 116) that occurs when ‘Pikkoro’ is revealed as an embedded world forces us to renegotiate what we know about the cycle as a whole and reveals ‘Pikkoro’ to be a hyperreal object. When characters in other stories reference ‘Pikkoro’, ‘Pikkoro’ is reinforced as a ‘real’ anime series, and these references to the fictional text further validate the primary diegesis, that is, the ‘reality’ of each particular story in which ‘Pikkoro’ is referred to as a fiction and a pop culture icon. When Ursula is at the party in ‘U’, for instance, she encounters a girl in a “Mavis Mercury T-shirt” who is “cycling through Wikipedia articles on her phone and whispering their titles” (Tan, 2019, p. 154). These titles include: “List of the United States Senators from Maine ... Max Muller (cross-country skier)” and “List of *Pikkoro and the Multipurpose Octopus* episodes” (p. 154). This small moment confirms ‘Pikkoro’ as a fiction within the fiction, but also, by listing ‘Pikkoro’ beside titles of actual names and objects with real Wikipedia pages, establishes ‘Pikkoro’ as a hyperreal object – a fiction that actually exists in the world, while simultaneously prompting the reader to question the validity of the other items in the list, and, potentially, Wikipedia itself. The reader is forced to reconsider the ontological status of ‘Pikkoro and the Multipurpose Octopus’ again when, in ‘Luxury Replicants’, the fourteenth story of the cycle, the protagonist Michael finds a fanfiction that makes reference to Tako, the octopus character of the animated series *Pikkoro and the Multipurpose Octopus*. The fanfiction (a doubly nested narrative) that is posted, is, rather uncannily, attributed to a user named “ljkv” (Tan, 2019, pp. 229–230). The sense of hyperreality is emphasised by this small moment when the reader recalls that l k j v is the Seed spam bot David was emailing in ‘Congratulations You May Have Already Won’. Constantly challenging the reader in this way draws attention to the fictionality and constructedness of the text itself. When this text also reflects 21st century life and the internet as *Rubik* does, the form and content merge to encourage critical engagement with the themes of the work.

McHale suggests that “Recursive structures” such as those present in *Rubik*, “may raise the specter of a vertiginous infinite regress” or may “dupe the reader into mistaking a representation at one narrative level for a representation at a lower or (more typically) higher level, producing the effect *trompe-l’oeil*” (McHale, 1987, p. 114). Once the reader registers the deception, the reading experience is reinvigorated. The reader is compelled to resist passive reading and to question their first impressions – a critical cognitive skill for the polymediated digital age where the disinformation of clickbait and sloppy journalism is pervasive. In *Rubik*, the reader first encounters Mavis Mercury in ‘Our Future is Apathy’. Like ‘Pikkoro’, ‘Our Future is Apathy’ initially appears to exist on the primary diegetic level due to the absence of markers indicating otherwise. The

narration is surreal, with Mavis Mercury's story being told as though she is in two places at once, each paragraph alternating between the interior and exterior of a supermarket. The story opens as follows:

Mavis Mercury has blue hair. She's shopping at her local Daily Dollar Savings. She picks up a jar of pasta sauce. A moment of lag. The supermarket stereo plays an echoing syrup of trumpets and woodwind. This muzak, quavering and sterile, twists in a hypnotic loop. It morphs into the opening bars of Mavis's song.

Drums.

In the Daily Dollar Savings parking lot: a stage built from overturned bread and milk crates, encircled by a slow-motion surging mosh pit of senior citizens. Mavis Mercury opens her eyes, her lashes stiff with silver glitter, a new breath rising in her throat. The seniors sway somnambulistically. (Tan, 2019, p. 86)

The "muzak" that feels like a "hypnotic loop", coupled with Mavis opening her eyes and the somnambulist sway of the senior citizens, gives the scene a dreamlike quality that is emphasised when Mavis is described as "pushing her trolley and singing ... advancing at half the speed of reality" (p. 87). Meanwhile, behind the supermarket shelves are children performing ridiculous acts of labour such as "hammering potatoes" and "arranging sesame seeds onto crispbread" (p. 87). At times, the narrative is interrupted with capitalised commands such as "SHOP WHILE YOU SLEEP" (p. 88). The story ends with Mavis, having inadvertently killed a "handsome checkout operator" with her kiss, hovering "in outer space above planet Earth" while also walking out of the grocery store (p. 89). Beginning with the initial description of Mavis moving at "half the speed of reality" (p. 87), the reader is immediately uncertain as to the reality of this story: whether Mavis is dreaming or awake and intoxicated, or whether she is existing in a virtual reality that has been superimposed on top of her own reality. Either way, because there are no contextual clues, we accept this story as its own kind of reality, its own primary diegesis within the broader cycle. It is, in effect, hyperreal; only in later stories do we learn that 'Our Future is Apathy' is the depiction of a music video. As with 'Pikkoro', the reader is drawn into the initial storyworld, duped into perceiving it as the primary diegesis: we cannot see the screen or the frame, as it was, and we accept seemingly unmediated access to a very strange reality. We learn about Mavis's status as a hyperreal object and 'Our Future is Apathy' as a hypodiegesis or fiction-within-the-fiction through small moments that occur in later stories, such as when Ursula encounters the girl in the Mavis Mercury T-shirt in 'U' (p. 154), and when in 'Everything Rises', there is a description of a song playing on the radio, its lyrics insisting "*our future is apathy*" (emphasis in original, Tan, 2019, p. 219). Each time the context shifts, Mavis Mercury takes on new significance. When we first encounter Mavis Mercury in 'Our Future is Apathy', Mavis's persona seems to represent escapism and apathy toward suffering under an exploitative capitalist system. Later, new information from different contexts – a person wearing a t-shirt and a song on the radio – lets us reread the story and

see it anew: what seems to be surreal or fantastic is actually the description of an artwork and its commentary on society. The reader, by progressing through the cycle, is given new interpretive clues that deepens their engagement with the themes of the work.

Reading *Rubik*, shuffling from story to story where the narrative form is never constant, we eventually wonder, ‘what’s the real story?’ or ‘is this reality? Is this someone’s dream or a character’s fanfiction?’ McHale argues that many postmodernist texts, like *Rubik*:

court confusion of levels, going out of their way to *suppress* the levels distinct in our minds ... deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world’ but that, typically, this deliberate ‘mystification’ is followed by ‘demystification,’ in which the true ontological status of the supposed ‘reality’ is revealed and the entire ontological structure of the text consequently laid bare. (McHale, 1987, pp. 114–115)

While complex, the ontological structure of *Rubik* is revealed through the small moments that make the connections across the cycle explicit. McHale summarises Jean Ricardou’s view of this technique as “variable reality” where the “supposedly ‘real’ representation is revealed to have been merely ‘virtual’ – an illusion or secondary representation, a representation with a representation – or vice versa” (McHale, 1987, p. 116). The use of variable reality forces the reader to “mentally reprocess the entire fictional world”, to question the primary diegesis or “reality” of the text. By employing a “variable reality” aesthetic in relation to the digital age, *Rubik* showcases the way we enter into the “reality” of the online world and the nature of representation – whether they be digital spaces or literary representations themselves. Online, we enter into relationships with bots or love scammers, we mistake advertising for news, we ‘follow’ our friends on Facebook and Instagram. These are untrustworthy and unreal agents. The short story cycle form, as demonstrated by *Rubik*, allows for these realities to be presented, challenged and recontextualised – particularly through small moments of explicit connectedness between real and fictional worlds. *Rubik* immerses the reader and tangles them in knots as they try to discern what is real from what is simulated by seeking connection points to illuminate fictionality versus reality. *Rubik*’s deployment of small moments turns these moments into hyperlinks and, at times frustratingly but always playfully, emulates the ways we are pulled into cyberspace and why we sometimes find it hard to get back out again.

Conclusion

Traditionally, literature has performed the vital role of shaping our thoughts about the world and our place in it. Literature has been the medium that immerses readers in alternative realities and alternative consciousnesses via the page. Today, however, the media we use to communicate

shapes more than our communications: it shapes our relationships and how we think about ourselves, and in turn, shapes our individual sense of reality and belonging. But the internet has not only changed the way we communicate, it has also changed the way we read. According to Nicholas Carr:

Hyperlinks also alter our experience of media. Links are in one sense a variation on the textual allusions, citations, and footnotes that have long been common elements of documents. But their effect on us as we read is not at all the same... Hyperlinks are designed to grab our attention. Their value as navigational tools is inextricable from the distraction they cause... We don't see the forest when we search the Web. We don't even see the trees. We see twigs and leaves. (Carr, 2010, pp. 90–91)

In the 21st century, digital life threatens the attention readers are willing to give to literature and challenges writers wishing to represent it. The short story cycle is a literary form that is capable of representing digital life, and it does so in a way that extends and expands the way that we read. Luscher states that “Our full realisation of the patterns weaving together such stories [in a cycle] often evolves from several rereadings, since only after reading the whole collection and confirming schemes of coherence can we fully reconcile the parts to the whole” (Luscher, 1989, p. 164). *Rubik* is richly intertextual and simulates the hyperreality of the internet, but the cycle form itself, through its multiplicity, trains us to stay in each story, to read deeply and sustain our attention before moving on to the next story in search of answers. Elizabeth Tan's *Rubik* revels in the challenge of reading and writing about life in the 21st century and in doing so, makes her short story cycle a game for the reader. As readers, we want to know what the real story is. What is this book really about? Meaning is constantly shifting as *Rubik* dips in and out of the virtual world. We often cannot tell the simulation from the real and neither can the characters. This theme runs through the storyworlds Tan has created and is a core component of the cycle as a whole. Ultimately, as readers, we realise that none of this is ‘real’ – it is, after all, just a book of short stories. But this in turn makes us consider the worlds we live in: the screens we interact with, the way we actually move through our lives in the 21st century. Now we simply need to stop scrolling and get back to reading.

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