

Exploring Methodologies for Studying Readers of Digital-Born Fiction

Astrid Ensslin¹; Alice Bell²; Jen Smith²
1 Bangor University; 2 Sheffield Hallam University

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the initial methodological deliberations undertaken in the AHRC-funded “Reading Digital Fiction” project (2014-16) (Ref: AH/K004174/1). Digital fiction is fiction born digital, i.e. it is written for and read from a computer and can be Web- or app-based or accessed via CD-ROMs. What distinguishes digital fictions from standard e-book formats is that they cannot be printed because they would lose something of their aesthetic and/or structural form and meaning if they were removed from the digital medium. For example, they may contain hyperlinks, moving images, mini-games and/or sound effects.

The core questions driving this project are as follows:

1. How can we use empirical literary methods to examine reader engagement and interaction with digital fictions?
2. Do readers’ responses to digital fictions corroborate or challenge current theories of narrative ‘you’ (Bell and Ensslin 2011, Ensslin and Bell 2012) as well as medium-specific multimodality (Ensslin 2009)?
3. What is the relationship between what readers expect to find and what they do find when following hyperlinks and other interactive interface devices in digital fictions?
4. Do different readers’ levels of digital literacy affect their interactions with digital fiction?

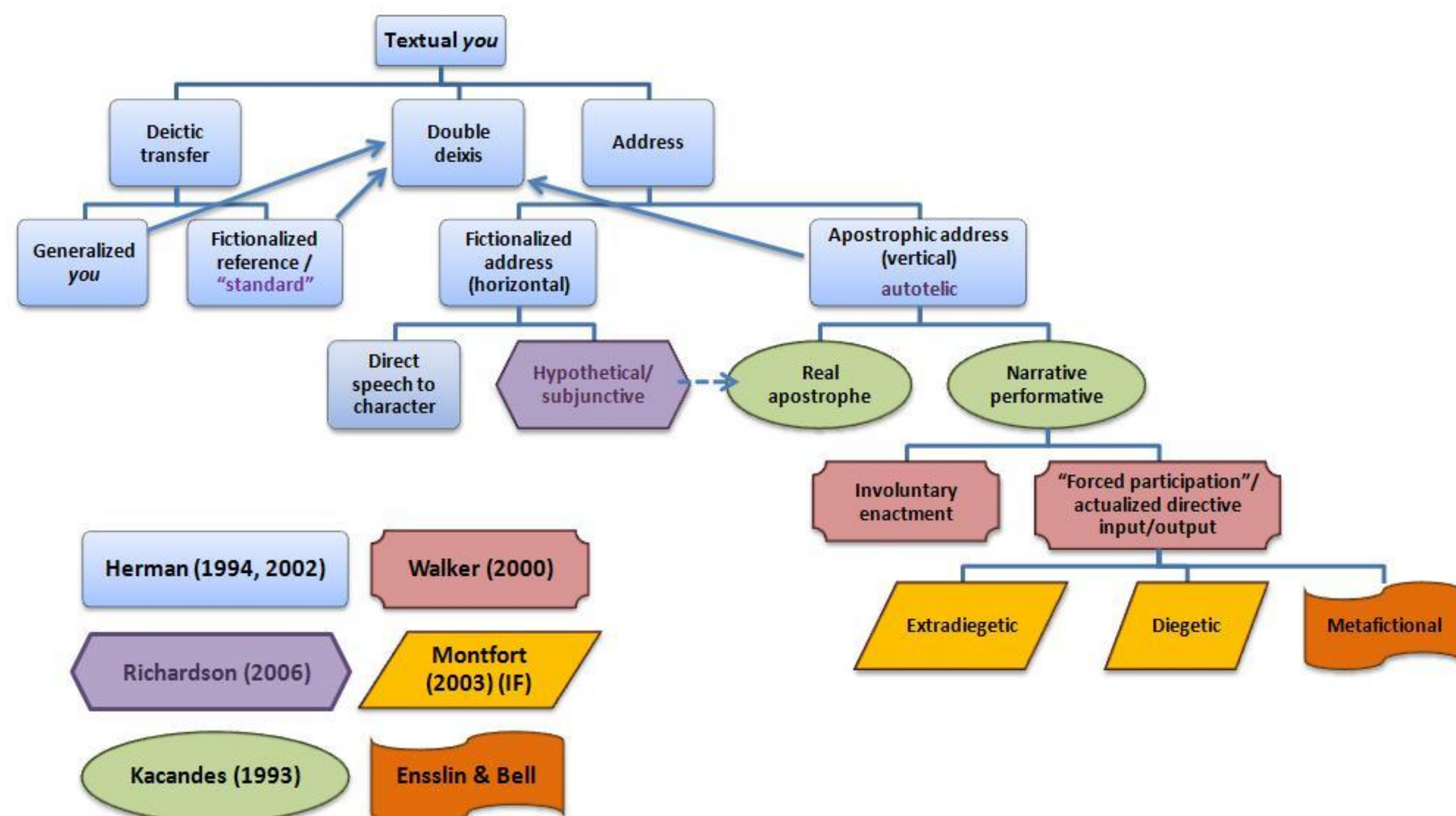
This poster focuses in particular on how to design a methodology for studying reader responses to textual ‘you’ (e.g. second person narration, various forms of address, and hybrid variants) in digital fictions exhibiting this device, e.g. geniware and Deena Larsen’s *The Princess Murderer* (2003) and Serge Bouchardon et al.’s *Opacity* (2012).

Disclaimer: looking at digital fiction does not preclude that our theories and experimental findings apply to non-digital (print) fiction as well; however, comparative studies are planned for a later project stage.

Key words: digital fiction; textual ‘you’; digital reading; methodology; multimodality

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Textual ‘you’ typology as systematised and expanded by Ensslin & Bell (2012) – based on a reading of *The Princess Murderer*



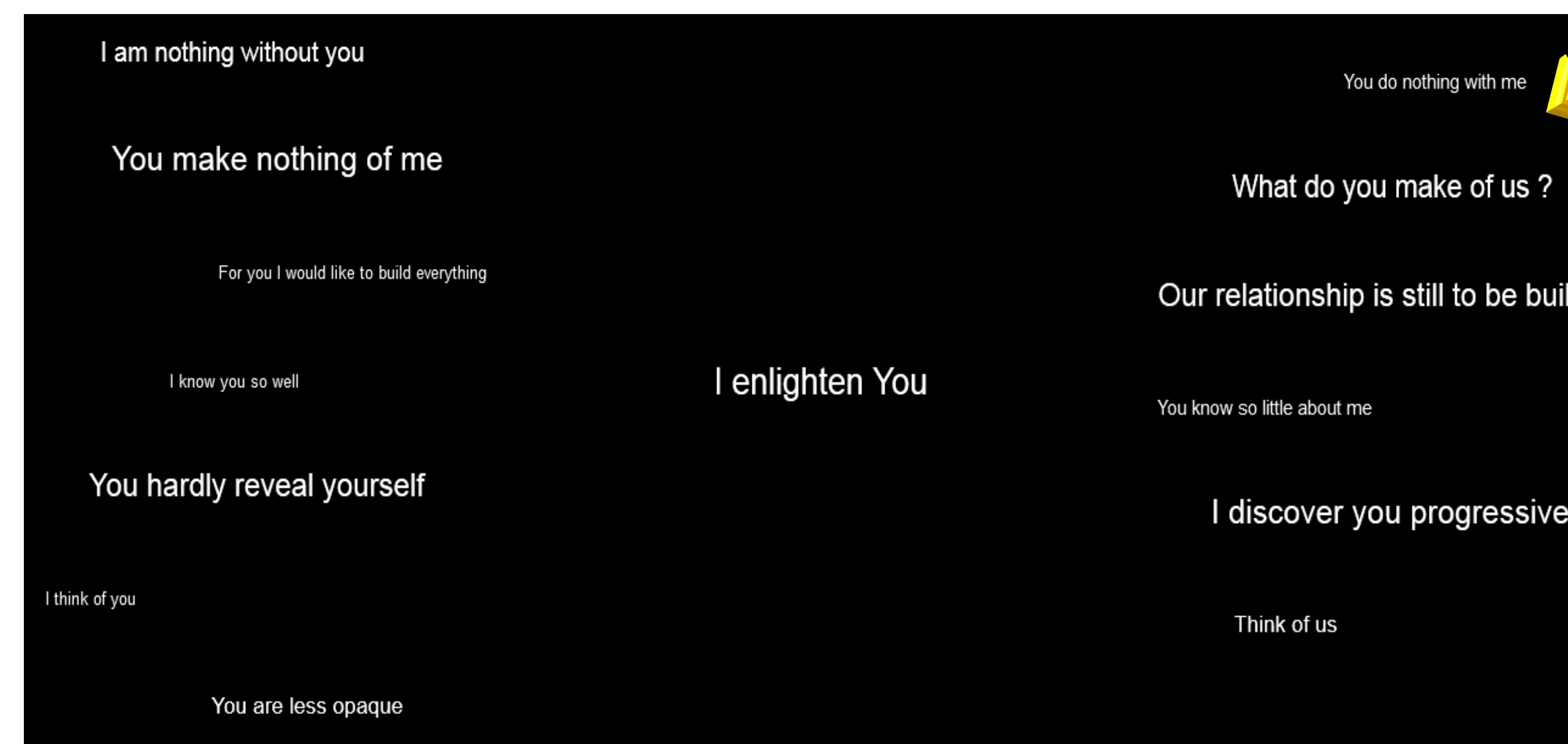
THE TEXTS

Chosen for complementarity:

The Princess Murderer: endless text through which readers navigate by clicking on one of three image icons at the top right (which change on each page) or three stick figures at the bottom right. There is no final screen, and depending on which links a reader clicks on, she may never see certain portions of the text in any individual reading.



Screenshots from *The Princess Murderer*



Screenshot from *Opacity*

Opacity: short, sequential story in four numbered parts. There are interactive elements in each part, but the parts appear in the same order for every reading, and each part must be completed before readers can move on to the next part. The instructions for navigating the text are not declared outright through icons, but experienced readers of digital fiction should be able to interact with the system effectively. *Opacity* also has a definite ending: after part four is finished, ‘The end’ appears on screen.



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PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

SUMMARY

Synthesis of second-wave narratological and stylistic analyses, cognitive poetic methodologies and reader-response data to offer an empirically grounded means of understanding how readers process, respond to, and interpret the use of second person narration in digital fiction.

EXPERIMENTAL FRAMEWORK

Population:

- Target number of participants: 15-20
- Purposive recruitment samples of [experienced](#) digital fiction readers (cf. Rustad 2009):
 - SHU and BU Humanities students (e.g. Digital Fiction module at SHU)
 - AHRC Digital Reading Network associates (Thomas 2014)

Lab set-up:

- Desktop computer with large monitor, keyboard and mouse
- Screen-recording software (Tobii)
- Researcher present with laptop computer
- 2 unobtrusive audio recorders

Activities

- One-to-one laboratory sessions (2 hours per participant)

Protocol

1. Introduction: 5 minutes
2. Briefing: 5 minutes
3. First free reading session: up to 10 minutes
4. **First guided session: 10 minutes**
5. First retrospective think-aloud replay: up to 20 minutes
6. Second free reading session: up to 10 minutes
7. **Second guided session: 10 minutes**
8. Second retrospective think-aloud replay: up to 20 minutes
9. Semi-structured interview: 15-20 minutes
10. Demographics questionnaire: 5 minutes

Guided sessions: “To whom does ‘you’ refer in this screen?”



RESULTS

The results of this study will contribute significantly to research into narrative ‘you’ in both print and digital fiction in cognitive poetics, cognitive linguistics, and cognitive narratology by investigating the ways in which readers respond to different forms of second-person narration.

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