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The Impact of Interactivity on Truth Claims in Life Stories

Autobiographies, biographies, and documentary life stories all claim to tell a 'true life story'. Yet each life story genre highlights different aspects of the truth. In autobiography, the personal subjective truth of self-identity is foregrounded. In biography, it is the seemingly objective truth about someone's life asserted by another person, whose mediation introduces an element of subjectivity. In a documentary life story testimonial, the credibility of the objective truth presented is of utmost importance, but so is the subjective life experience that undergirds it. In this article we ask: How is interactivity exploited to construct the truth claims in interactive life stories across genres? By comparing three interactive nonfiction life stories – an autobiography, *Fitting the Pattern* (Wilks 2008), the biographical docugame *The Cat and the Coup* (Brinson / ValaNejad 2011), and the documentary *Alma* (Fougère / Dewever-Plana 2012) –, we explore how the aspects of truth most relevant to each life story genre are foregrounded using interactivity.

1. Introduction

Truth is a greatly contested notion, and in the field of life writing, this discussion becomes central. A life story is considered to be grounded in the nonfictional world because it makes statements about someone's life that are implicitly or explicitly asserted as true. What does it mean to say something is 'true'? How are these truth claims in life storytelling constructed? These questions are extremely broad in scope, and it is impossible to respond to them comprehensively within a single article. Entire books have been written or touch upon the subject of truth in life narratives, whether biographical, autobiographical or documentary (cf. Backscheider 1999, Eakin 1999, Nichols 2001, Godmilow 2002, Bruzzi 2006, Smith / Watson 2010). Our contribution here is to extrapolate this discussion to the interactive media context, considering specifically how the affordance of interactivity affects the construction of truth in a life narrative in each of the genres. Under study are the basic life story genres of autobiography, biography and documentary life stories; we have taken one example from each genre as a case study.

1.1 Life story genres

We can roughly divide life stories into three categories: autobiographies, in which the author is the main character of the story (hereafter called the 'life

protagonist'); biographies, in which a life is told by someone else, but in which the life story remains the key point of the work; and other documentaries involving life stories, in which the life story serves as a testimonial, but is subservient to the explicit purpose of the documentary. Typically these documentaries are aimed at making an argument about a wider social issue. These three categories are by no means exhaustive, but they provide a general guide to the basic types of life story[1].

Although these genres are broadly considered nonfictional and are concerned with the task of relating lives, they differ significantly in their approach to truth. Each life story genre emphasises subjective and objective truth to differing degrees, depending on the purpose to which the genre is oriented. Autobiography, for instance, rests almost wholly upon subjective truth, as the life story is mediated through the voice of the author who is the protagonist. On the opposite end, in documentary, objective truth is foregrounded, and without it the work falls apart. Biography seems to be somewhere in the middle. We look briefly at each genre, its purpose and what aspect of truth becomes particularly salient for it.

An autobiography is necessarily subjective, since it concerns the personal life of the acting subject and is told from his or her point of view. The life protagonist is a narrative construct created by the author and explicitly presented as a representation of him- / herself, so that the truth is coloured through the lens of his / her perspective. Since the purpose of autobiography is to share an experience or an understanding of one's own life as subjectively lived, the personal, subjective truth of self-identity is foregrounded, rather than its historical verifiability. For this reason, truth in autobiography is probably best understood through the philosophical lens of personalistic phenomenology, which places emphasis on the lived experience of a personal subject (cf. Adams / van Manen 2008). In such an approach, the acting subject's experience is considered the basis for subjective truth (cf. Scruton 2002). Because the space of a person's interior life lived from the inside can only be subjective by definition, authenticity then becomes the touchstone of truth, and it is the intention to be authentic that renders the autobiography truthful or not. If there is an intention to be authentic, the autobiographer's version of the truth cannot be challenged: if the autobiographical writer asserts something as truly experienced by him- / herself, this assertion is to be taken as a true statement, resting on the unspoken trust between reader and author who enter implicitly into an "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune 1989) when they write or read an autobiography.[2] The truth is presented from life protagonist to reader and its meaning is negotiated between them. According to Smith and Watson (2010, 16), autobiographical truth

> resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life […] the authority of the autobiographical, then, neither confirms nor invalidates notions of objective truth. Rather, it tracks the previously uncharted truths of particular lives.

Being mostly about the interior world, external, objective truth takes a back seat. Thus, a more interior, reflective tone is found in most autobiographies,

sometimes taking on a confessional tone; the process of self-discovery in piecing together the autobiographical narrative may also be shared with the reader. In interactive autobiography, the affordance provided by interactivity serves this subjective truth, so that it can be told not just verbally, but through allowing for an experience, mediated by metaphor. We will see this in our analysis of the autobiographical narrative *Fitting the Pattern*.

A work in the documentary genre, by contrast, draws upon a tradition fundamentally grounded in assumptions of truth as objective[3]. The fact that the documentarian draws on "actuality […] to construct an account of lives and events", means that "[e]mbedded within the account of physical reality is a claim or assertion at the centre of all non-fictional representation, namely, that a documentary depiction of the sociohistorical world is *factual and truthful*." (Beattie 2004, 10 [our emphasis; EC, AM]) However, tempting as it is to align documentary with a simple 'objective' point of view on an unproblematic truth, many scholars have pointed out that it is impossible to provide a purely objective representation of reality, since every documentary producer consciously or unconsciously introduces his / her own voice into the narrative. This is because every representation also involves the selection of data, which determines the work's point of view and introduces an element of subjectivity (cf. Nichols 2001, Ward 2005, Bruzzi 2006, Saunders 2010, Rabiger 2014).

Despite the recent self-reflexive turn in documentary theory, however, ultimately the authority and credibility of documentary as a genre rest upon an unspoken claim to represent things that actually happen or happened, as they happened (even if it is a reconstruction) – which admittedly does not preclude a subjective bias or angle on the story.[4] Epistemologically, documentary discourse rests upon the authority of a primarily objective worldview, that is, on an assumption that objective reality exists, and that it can be known.[5] When a documentary makes use of a life story as evidence and part of its argument, however, another level of discourse comes into play in its relationship with the truth: the 'testimony' of the life protagonist (given from a subjective point of view), whose authority rests upon lived experience, serves to bolster the credibility of an argument based upon an objective worldview. In the documentary testimonial life story, the life story is subjugated to the aim imposed by the documentary maker. The life story is employed with the main aim of informing or persuading the audience about an issue; the argument rests upon the credibility of the life story as evidence and support for the documentarian's main argument. The 'subjective truth' expressed by the testimonial giver (the life protagonist) is essential to the narrative, since it forms part of the evidence, but it is co-opted within an objective frame. For a testimonial life story to be effective, both the authority of the subjective and objective claims to truth are necessary: it is important that the audience connects emotionally to the subjective feeling of the life story, for this testimonial to be effective in the service of the documentarian's aims; yet it is equally crucial that in the audience's mind, the story represents part of a greater objective truth. Without the latter, the whole

claim of the documentary would fall apart. *Alma* successfully does this by blending the two modes of discourse into a single story.

In a biography, the biographical truth is the (purported) truth about someone's life *according to someone else*. Ultimately, the biographical life story presents a life 'objectified', placed under scrutiny, and hence couched in the epistemology of the objective realist frame; but this presentation is mediated through an external subjective consciousness: that of the biographer, who acts as a focalizer. The biographer, like the documentarian, straddles the objective and subjective worlds as he / she attempts to evoke the 'qualia' of the subject's life (cf. Herman 2009, 137) while at the same time establishing his / her credibility in the reader's eyes through multiple references to external objective evidence. References to historical events and dates establish the storyteller as a knowledgeable authority on the life subject. Once more, the 'objective truth' becomes a frame for situating the discourse within nonfiction, a way of establishing credibility.

The difference is that in biography, the life story *per se* is the key point of the narrative and is not subjugated to an extrinsic goal. The main purpose of a biography is to paint a portrait of the life subject, both from the outside and the inside[6]. While biographers do their best to represent the person, however, in the process, the biographer's own self inevitably enters the picture as a bridge between the life protagonist and the reader and, as Backscheider (1999, 3-4) observes, "the bridge is not a neutral grey". The biographer's inability to relive the subject's life from his / her point of view makes it impossible to relate the life as the 'I' actually lived it; only a re-imagined version of that life can be constructed. Ultimately the 'I' of the biographer always interposes itself – to a greater or lesser extent – between the reader and the life protagonist. This 'I' can be subtle or intrusive – the biographer can attempt to intrude as little as possible on the life and let the facts speak for themselves; or, deliberately taking a stronger angle as narrator, can pronounce judgement, evaluate and almost obscure the voice of the life protagonist.[7] Moreover, it is worth noting that the two are not mutually exclusive. According to Backscheider, the more skilful a biographer is, the more 'invisibly' he / she guides the discourse, and the more subtly the biographer's subjective angle colours the reader's understanding of the life. In *The Cat and the Coup*, interactivity is used as a tool by the invisible biographers' 'I', so as to construct an argument without words. It is rather the procedural rhetoric of the game that makes the argument on behalf of the authors.

1.2 Objective and subjective truth

Before proceeding, a brief explanation of what is meant by 'subjective truth' and 'objective truth' is in order. Nevertheless, we do not wish to enter into protracted discussion on the ontologies and epistemologies of truth here, as they would detract from the main point of this article. What is of primary in-

terest to us is how the stories under consideration construct – and appeal to – the truth: the discourses of truth that play out in the different genres of life story, and specifically how these apply in interactive works in new media. We will therefore limit ourselves to a brief discussion, taking the view in this paper that truth is multifaceted, such that objective and subjective truth are considered as different lenses looking upon the same reality.[8]

In nonfictional narrative, the ontological or factual existence of objective reality is usually taken for granted (e.g. that the real world exists, that the situation depicted really exists), but the epistemological underpinnings may be questioned through strategies that create doubt about how true *this* representation of events is: to what extent this truth can be adequately represented (cf. Ronen 2010). Discourses that hinge upon a notion of 'objective truth' – such as documentary discourse – are a result of a realist attitude that: 1) ontologically speaking, treats reality as unquestionably 'objective' and 'factual', 2) epistemologically, is grounded in the assumption that reality exists independently of sense perception and that accurate knowledge of the world is possible. This worldview underlies naïve realism, prevalent in much early documentary, which takes a naturalist approach and "attributes objective validity to sense perception in transmitting information about the world" (ibid., 488), so that the result is an apparently 'transparent window' onto the issue. Statements about the world are issued in a factual, authoritative and apparently neutral tone. Naïve realism "assumes a non-problematic relation between a set of signs and things in the world" (ibid.), an approach which still fundamentally undergirds the authority of the documentary genre today[9]. On the other hand, a later self-reflexive trend in documentaries has given rise to works that highlight the constructed nature of the narrative, even deliberately leaving doubts in the audience's mind about the veracity or credibility of the sources of information.[10]

Where 'objective truth' proposes factuality or correspondence of fact with the proposition as the criteria for truth (Craig 2005, 888), the contrasting notion of 'subjective truth' considers the truth of a given situation as perceived from the inside, i.e. as lived experience. The priority given to the authority of the subjective experience aligns it more with the phenomenological tradition in philosophy, which, as we noted above, regards authentic, experiential narrative as representing the truth of a particular subject (Adams / van Manen 2008). Earlier we described autobiography as highly subjective. In fact, however, all life story genres are subject to the same constraints: it is highly difficult, if not impossible, to tell a 'purely objective' (human) life story. This difficulty comes about from two sources: First, a life observed externally is not the same thing as a life observed 'from the inside'. A historian may capture the external trappings of a life, but a person's interior life is a wholly different dimension. In telling a life story about a particular experience, what matters is how the person lived it, or the "qualia" of the experience (cf. Herman 2006). The main part of this (a person's thoughts and feelings) is not externally observable but sits squarely in the realm of the phenomenological, since it relates to the subjective, intimate interiority of the life protagonist's experience. Second, in non-

autobiographical works, a life is always contemplated from someone else's particular point of view. This may be the biographer or the documentary film director, even the editor. A certain subjectivity thus comes into play, since – as we noted earlier – the narrator's own interpretation or agenda enters the picture.

Thus, although any life story is grounded in objective reality, i.e., in objective fact, the subjective element is arguably central to any life story, both as regards the living subject and his / her lived experience and as regards the intrusion of the subjective voice and perspective of the narrator or storyteller (in biography or documentary). As we will see later, in nonfictional interactive media narratives, different voices are interwoven on different levels to construct these varying claims on truth, sometimes complementing and sometimes competing. Across the three works studied, different aspects of subjective and objective truth are highlighted. Although it is impossible to communicate the entirety of someone's life, a life story may give an insight into what the person felt, lived and did, and into his / her motivations and emotions. How this is done varies according to genre, as the subjective voice interweaves with objective realist discourse in diverse ways.

1.3 What does interactivity add?

In the preceding section, we considered how the three life writing genres privilege different aspects of subjective and objective truth. Through our analysis of three interactive works, we now examine more closely what specific strategies and techniques authors use to foreground their truth claims in interactive life stories. Specifically, we ask how authors of autobiographical, biographical and documentary interactive life stories use interactivity as part of a strategy to foreground subjective and / or objective aspects of the personal or historical truths that they wish to convey, often by using a central organizing metaphor as a tool.

Why interactive media? From the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century, the growing pervasiveness of personal computing and the Internet has given rise to increasing numbers of life story works in the interactive online domain, from personal homepages in the 1980s up to the social network "small stories" generated by Facebook and Instagram status updates (cf. Page 2013). At the same time, technological developments have made it possible to create and upload a variety of multimodal life story works, amid these changing technological and sociocultural practices.[11] Although multimodal life narrative works like our three case studies do not exist in great numbers, they engage more creatively with the multimodal possibilities afforded by the new medium, resulting in rich layered texts with complex meanings that make them worth studying in their own right.

What is so different, then, about life stories told in interactive media in comparison with traditional media such as print and film?[12] First, new media[13] is often based upon a collage aesthetic, typically fragmentary rather than linear, and frequently remediates older media (cf. Bolter / Grusin 2000). This allows for the co-existence of multiple levels of discourse, in such a way that the composite, fragmented nature of the work seems to raise awareness of the constructedness of the text and the various discourses that make up its claims to truth.[14]

Second, in an effectively designed work, interactivity changes the experience of a story radically by implicating the reader / audience / player (henceforth called the 'interactor') directly in co-constructing the story: without his / her constant involvement, the story cannot be told.[15] The interactivity becomes the means *through which* the reader understands the work, so that the interactions themselves, shaped by the embedded procedural rhetoric[16], become a constitutive part of the life story experience. The reader constructs the meaning of the story through the interactions. In our interactive autobiography, biography and documentary case studies, we find the interactor immersed within a complex mesh of signs and signifiers, directly involved in negotiating the truth claims in each case.

2. Methodology

As interactive narratives cover a wide range of diverse phenomena, finding an adequate method can be a challenge. It can indeed be argued that interactive media are really a disparate collection of different media modes having only the qualities of 'digital' and 'interactive' in common.[17] Our present dataset include: a Flash-based, text-heavy interactive memoir with graphics (*Fitting the Pattern*), an interactive video with two parallel visual tracks (*Alma*) and a docugame (*The Cat and the Coup*). As such, the method chosen had to be sufficiently broad and flexible to allow us to analyse such different works but specific enough to allow us to isolate the effect of interactivity on the truth claims of each life story.

We therefore chose to use close reading, a method developed in literary studies. Among proponents for close reading as a form of interpreting interactive works are Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011), who use it as an analytical tool for the analysis of videogames and other interactive texts. Their approach involves theoretically deriving well-defined *a priori* theoretical lenses and then playing through the works or games taking the role of a naïve player (as opposed to an expert player).[18] The observations arising from these playthroughs are data that are then analysed in order to "to excavate previously hidden qualities of a media artifact" (ibid.).

We also had in mind Jeffrey and Shaowen Bardzell's proposals for developing a methodologically rigorous 'interaction criticism' as a way to understand the aesthetics and context of interactive design works critically (cf. Bar-

dzell / Bardzell 2008 and Bardzell 2011). Bardzell (2011) argues that human-computer interaction and interaction design must also take into account the 'cultural layer' when considering how humans interact with computers. This layer can be understood as comprising the creator, the artifact, the consumer and the social context. The specific relevance of this for our close readings is the reference to external forces that exist outside of the text, unlike traditional text-based analyses. Since we are interested in truth claims, i.e. contextual aspects, we need to combine the text-oriented method of close reading with an approach that also highlights real world references and the production context. We therefore adopt this aspect of Bardzell's interaction criticism, which links the reading of the interactive text with its wider context.[19]

Both sets of scholars agree that to read the complex interactive work adequately, it is necessary to oscillate between the part (detailed-level reading) and the whole (high-level reading). Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) note that this involves the scholar taking on a dual role of 'naïve player' and detached neutral observer – on the one hand, playing and reading the game as if approaching it for the first time, while on the other being able to self-reflexively observe the whole process as if standing outside of it.

Our method, combining both Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum's close readings and Bardzell's interaction criticism, consists of repeated and deeply considered interactions or 'close readings' in order to surface useful critical insights. The initial playthroughs were done from the point of view of a naïve interactor to glean initial observations, and subsequent playthroughs from an 'expert' point of view, revisiting specific portions to further study their role in the larger story. With the specific aim of isolating strategies for the creation of objective and subjective truth, we chose the two most logical and specific lenses through which to examine the works. 'Objective truth' was understood as ways of establishing or referring to truth as a historical, verifiable fact, or establishing a discourse that appears to assert this truth authoritatively. 'Subjective truth' was any expression that could be understood as representing the emotions, perceptions and worldview of the life protagonist. As digital interactive texts are also multimodal, we considered these phenomena as they arose in the verbal text, visually, aurally, temporally as well as interactively. However, only the relevant aspects will be raised for discussion.

In addition, following from Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) original conceptual metaphor theory, Forceville (2008), Schröter (2015) and others have suggested that conceptual metaphors can function as transmedial concepts that can be usefully applied across media for the analysis of multimodal works, including interactive media. While we have not adopted this as the main theoretical framework of analysis, we have occasionally found it useful to identify and discuss the metaphors around which the works are structured.

3. Case studies

Interactive digital media art works allow for and even demand constant participation from the interactor to make the story or program move forward. But this interaction – whether clicking a mouse, swiping a touchscreen or through some other input device – takes on different meanings depending on how it is deployed. We have deliberately chosen three relatively diverse kinds of interactive work – an interactive text-based memoir with graphics, an interactive video and a docugame – in order to showcase a variety of possible interactive strategies. For convenience's sake, we have limited our sample to interactive digital works freely available online.

The following analyses show how interactivity forms part of an overall strategy in which the subjective and / or objective truth is asserted within a work. We also observe how in each case, interactivity does not take place in a vacuum, as it were, nor does it have the same effect in all cases: *what* is interacted with is as important as *how* the interaction works. The authors make use of metaphors and other techniques to surface the subjective or objective elements of truth, in order to construct truth claims in cooperation with the interactor.

3.1 *Fitting the Pattern*: Experiencing subjective truth through metaphor

Fitting the Pattern is an autobiographical work by Christine Wilks (2008), who reflects on her own identity against the background of the professional identity of her mother, a dressmaker, showing how her mother's profession has affected her life and self-concept.

3.1.1 Autobiography and the truth of subjectivity

As befits autobiography, *Fitting the Pattern* is very personal, focusing on the interior reality of the author. Subjective truth comes to the forefront, while references to the objective realist frame are absent. Lacking the photorealistic indexical visual references proper to documentary, the only references to the extra-diegetic world that signal the 'true story' status of *Fitting the Pattern* are the subtitles "…being a dressmaker's daughter: A *memoir* in pieces" [our emphasis; EC, AM]. As with most typical autobiographies, after this assertion it is taken for granted that the audience accepts that all authorial statements in this diegetic reality can be taken on trust.[20] The only indication that some poetic license is being taken is the word 'embroidered', which floats in in pale grey cursive font; but its very presence reinforces the impression of veracity and sincerity on the author's part.

Although the events related allow us to paint a general picture of a working-class family in a rough neighbourhood, there is no attempt to factually substantiate any of the recounted events of the author's childhood, to situate it in the extra-diegetic world by using dates or proper place names. This absence also signals that what is important in an autobiographical story is not the facticity of the real-world occurrences as much as the interior reality of the author's life as she experienced it.

3.1.2 Interactive metaphor as the expression of subjective truth

Since autobiographical truth is measured by the authenticity in the intersubjective relationship between author and reader, rather than by external factual corroboration, the storyteller must tell his / her subjectively true story in such a way that the player experiences something of the truth of her life. Wilks achieves the transmission of this subjective truth interactively, by making the interactor experience metaphorically the constraints of her childhood – as the interactor is bound to "follow the pattern" with the virtual tool to reveal the text, he / she participates in the experience of the constraints that the author relates in the text. Dressmaking appears as the central organizing concept around which this work is made, visually, textually, aurally and even interactively. The 'pattern' used in dressmaking emerges through the text as a metaphor for the 'mold' of expectations set by her mother and society, against which the author expresses her own rebellion and feelings of conflict. The dressmaking tools present in the interface become tools for the dissection and construction of her life story, in which the interactor participates.

By clicking with the mouse, the interactor must 'pick up' each of four different dressmaking tools in turn, and "follow the pattern" by cutting, pinning, sewing or unpicking the areas indicated to reveal the story. Each of the tools depicted represents a different aspect of the author's relationship with her mother: scissors cutting are negative emotions (cutting as destructive); sewing represents positive emotions (sewing / making as constructive); pins reveal how the daughter is like the mother, or more specifically, is constrained to be like the mother (pinning as constraint); unpicking reveals how the daughter is unlike her mother (unpicking as liberating self-discovery) (cf. Wilks 2009). Understanding the tools metaphorically enriches the interactor's reading of the text and gives a deeper understanding of the different aspects of the mother-daughter relationship: the daughter feels 'cut up' as she doesn't fit her mother's expectations or pattern, both physically and otherwise; she feels 'pinned' to a certain "model daughter" mold that she feels she should fit into but does not; yet her rebellious distancing from her mother is self-evaluated as an unravelling: "the model daughter/coming apart at the seams". Finally, the sewing seems to indicate that all these different tensions and fragments need to be

stitched together somehow to form a complete identity, and this work represents her attempt to achieve this task.

Structure-wise, *Fitting the Pattern* has a linear overarching structure but database logic ensconced within each stage. There is a possibility of choice within each stage, but a linear progression from stage to stage. The structure looks like this (see Fig. 1):

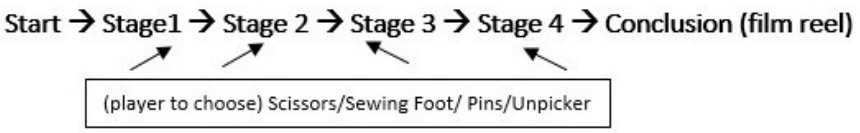

Fig. 1: The structure of *Fitting the Pattern*

Within each stage the interactor can choose to 'pick up' one of the four tools, with no restriction on the order. After use, the tool is greyed out, so at each stage, using a tool reveals a fragment of text that is read only once. Upon picking up the tool, the player is guided to follow certain actions with the help of visual cues. For instance when the scissors appear, the player must follow the dotted lines to cut accordingly. A pale grey scissors icon hovers over the place where the player should 'cut', like a subtle guiding hand. If the player does not obey the instructions, a grey hand appears to point out the right direction. The interactor must complete using all four tools before he / she is allowed to move to the next stage. When one stage (i.e. all four tools) is completed, a piece of the pattern at the bottom right corner shades grey to indicate the player's progress and the tool kit is automatically replenished as the interactor moves on to the next stage.

3.1.3 'Constraint' and co-construction through non-immersive engagement

There are two mechanisms at work to recreate subjective reality in the interactivity in *Fitting the Pattern*. First, the design of the interface which constrains the interactor's movements mirrors the author's life experience in a metaphorical way. The interactor cannot move freely but is bound to follow where the text guides him / her. Second, the quality of interaction highlights the element of engagement rather than immersion[21] in the subjective diegetic reality, resulting in a meta-level reflection on the process of autobiographical self-fashioning. The interactor is constantly aware of not being the author, but is also aware of being engaged in co-constructing her subjective truth.

First let us consider the constraints as part of the subjective experience. Constraints are a key theme of the work. Although the title reads "Fitting the Pattern", the author alleges that she "never wanted to fit the pattern". A strong theme running through the piece is that of constraints imposed by familial ties, what Wilks (2009) has termed the "intimate perplexity of the mother-daughter

relationship and interconnected life patterns". The author relates a story of negotiating and defining one's own identity by both building upon and reacting against her mother's identity.

The constraints are delivered interactively, through the interactive metaphor of the dressmaking tools which the reader must manipulate to 'help' Christine construct her identity – or, more accurately, to co-construct the author's self-reflection with her and thus discover her subjective reality. Although there is no 'voice of God' narrator in this text, it can be said that the procedural rhetoric inscribed in the interface – the indications that appear in the form of the grey pointing finger and the impossibility of proceeding in any other way than that prescribed by the text – *are* a near substitute for the 'voice of God' narrator. The 'rules' of the interaction thus become a metaphor for the constraints experienced during the author's childhood, in which she always felt she had to fit into a prescribed pattern ("I always felt I should fit the clothes / rather than the clothes fit me"). They give the interactor a first-hand experience of the meaning of the ever-present 'constraint' in the life of the author, a subjective truth that is conveyed not literally but metaphorically.

Second, the mechanics of intermittent engagement demanded by the text results in a simultaneous closeness with and distanciation from the author's subjective world, preventing immersion in it but on the other hand encouraging a reflection on the process of autobiographical identity construction. The repeated action of clicking to choose a tool, exerting effort to control its direction, guiding it carefully through the required steps to reveal a text fragment, draws the interactor's attention to his / her own embodied participation in the text, preventing a more complete immersion in the story. The virtual action of cutting, sewing, pinning and unpicking are carried out by the interactor who is thus identified with both the author's mother (who is the dressmaker) and, more directly, with the author, because the virtual action of dressmaking is bound up with the unveiling of the textual fragments of the life story. The interactor engages with the tools in order to 'piece together' not a dress, but the life story of the author. As the dress is gradually made, going from stage 1 to 4, the life story comes together from a patchwork of textual fragments.

The life story experience is not seamless, since the action of picking up and using the tools causes the interactor to be engaged rather than immersed, constantly going in and out of the diegetic world, unable to be fully immersed in it. While the constant interruption of the experience of reading apparently detracts from immersion in the author's subjective experience, in fact it also serves to highlight another aspect of the authorial experience – the fragmentary nature of the autobiographer's experience of self-identity construction. Through the piecemeal, mildly haphazard process of co-constructing the life story, the interactor is invited to identify with the author's life, not just in experiencing the constraints of her childhood, but also in experiencing the uncertainty of self-discovery and identity construction in the process of negotiating her identity. Unlike film, this story does not invoke the truth of subjective experience by the fiction of imaginative immersion in the shoes of the other.

Rather, the interactor is invited inside the subjective world of the autobiographical author, but at the same time the constant interactivity ensures that the boundaries between the self of the author and the self of the interactor are never completely erased. What the interactivity does is to invite the interactor to experience, together with the author, the process of self-discovery and identity construction in building a life story.

3.1.4 Summary

In the autobiographical work *Fitting the Pattern*, subjective truth is foregrounded using interactivity, particularly through enacting constraint via the dressmaking metaphor. Nonetheless, the strategy of engagement rather than immersion, which results in the interactor's attention constantly going in and out of the diegetic world, reminds the interactor that he / she is participating in co-constructing the author's subjective world but is, somehow, both inside and outside of it.

3.2 *Alma*: Double focalization of an objective / subjective truth

Unlike *Fitting the Pattern*, the interactive video-based *Alma: A Tale of Violence* (Fougère / Dewever-Plana 2012), a web documentary based on a testimonial life story, foregrounds its claims on objective truth strongly, because establishing credibility plays an important role for the documentarian. The typical truth claims of a video documentary testimonial are couched within a framework of objectivity. At the same time, the subjective experience continues to be of paramount importance, since an effective documentary should have some emotional impact on the viewer-interactor. Interactivity in *Alma* allows the interactor to switch between parallel worlds that frame the objective and subjective worldviews, thus allowing for both the objective and subjective frame to surface.

3.2.1 The lower layer: Documentary's objective frame

The web documentary consists of two levels of parallel video. The lower level shows Alma talking, and the upper 'evocative' layer shows background context and what seems to be a continuous thought bubble representing Alma's interior world. The evocative layer contains a mixture of expressive surreal hand-drawn art and photo-real images and videos of Alma's family and the Guatemalan slums and villages. The viewer has the ability to choose which of the two visual tracks to follow and can swipe up and down to move from one to the other.

In the lower layer, *Alma* draws upon typical film documentary conventions to establish its authority and credibility. For instance, the lower layer cinematography follows the conventions of a 'talking head documentary', with Alma testifying to her own lived experiences. Alma is seated at close range, looking straight into the camera against a sombre black background. Her voice tells her story in a matter-of-fact, almost monotonous voice, except at a few moments. The camera zooms in occasionally for an extreme close up and otherwise does not move, making her an object of scrutiny to the viewer. This objectifying gaze is sometimes unforgiving, and does not move even when she is describing a disturbing or gruesome incident, or when she starts to cry. In this way, the lower track establishes the real world connection and represents credibility, realism and objectivity.

3.2.2 The upper evocative layer: Alma's subjective truth

Despite the dominance of the objective frame, in documentary testimonials like *Alma*, the personal voice is powerful and important, because it gives us a face and a historical reality upon which to hang a series of arguments. Thus in the upper 'evocative' layer, strategies are employed to transmit the subjective truth of Alma's lived experience. Visually, the artwork here combines two distinct styles – photorealistic image stills or videos, and hand-drawn stylised artwork depicting events narrated by Alma. The hand-drawn artwork elements, deliberately simple and naïve in style, add a personal, childlike touch to the documentary and seem to indicate what Gestalt psychologists call 'the child inside' – the childhood Alma is thinking of as she speaks, and perhaps the child who still exists underneath. Often, the hand-drawn, stylized animations represent memories such as the boy who liked her when she was a teenager, or her memories of her abusive, drunken father beating up her mother. At other moments, the stylized artwork elements are simply expressive, as when a transition shows inked blood dripping from the photograph of a dead man's arm.

The photographs and videos of slums and gangs in Guatemala on the upper evocative layer have a slightly more complex dual function: First, they can be construed as images from Alma's memory, and hence part of her interior world (this is part of the overall strategy that makes the evocative layer something akin to a continuous thought bubble). Second, however, these photorealistic images, while depicting part of Alma's subjective world, also point the interactor outside, to the extradiegetic world in which the interactor lives. The specific indexical quality of the photographic image, which provides 'irrefutable' proof of the objective grim reality of existence of the Mara gangs and their victims, reminds the interactor that this reality does not only exist inside Alma's head, but in a real, shared geographical reality. Photographic representations indicate objective irrefutability by their inherent reference to the real physical world, and their presence in a sphere that is otherwise dedicated to showing some-

one's interior subjective world subtly reasserts the objective frame by reaffirming the 'real' existence of the violent world depicted.

Nevertheless, despite the objective 'realism' of the camera, the camerawork itself is also capable of reflecting Alma's subjective experience in an abstract, poetic way, primarily through point-of-view shots. For instance when Alma is shot by her 'homies', we hear a gunshot. The evocative layer first shows someone running away, and then shows only the sun shining and blue sky, as if the camera were representing her falling to the ground. This collage sequence departs from the objective documentary frame to reflect the life protagonist's subjective experience in an implied re-enactment. (Note, however, that this experience, rather than being a direct representation of Alma's experience, is a reconstruction created collaboratively by Alma's narrating voice, the cinematographer, the film editor and the entire documentary team.)

The interplay between the photorealistic and stylized artwork styles in the evocative layer blurs the boundaries between the objective and subjective worlds in the audience's experience, but without merging them – the subjective world of expressive feeling and thought draws attention to and highlights the objective world of real facts, but they remain clearly separate, with one layer representing Alma from the outside, third-person perspective, and the other from the inside, from an imagined, reconstructed first-person perspective.

3.2.3 Interactivity: Blending the two worlds

In this work, interactivity plays a key part: as the parallel layers allow for the simultaneous use of internal and external focalization, the interactor can decide which aspect of the story to watch. We are thus able to traverse the two worlds of her reality – her life as seen from outside, as a gangster, and her life as perceived by her on the inside, including memories of her family. There is an apparent freedom in the ability to move up or down between the parallel video tracks to actively construct the story. When the story gets too violent, the viewer can 'escape' by looking at landscapes of Guatemala instead of being confronted by the harsher reality of Alma describing to the viewer in detail how she and her gang killed someone in cold blood.

There are moments in which the objective and subjective worlds spill over into each other; for instance, when she utters the words "Todo se paga" (loosely translatable as "Everything has a price") realizing with remorse that her violent acts may come back to her, the hand scrawled words appear in the top left corner and fill the top layer spilling over to the bottom. This demonstrates symbolically how Alma's whole consciousness is filled with remorse and awareness of potential vengeance being visited on her and her family. The feeling in the interior world is so powerful that it spills over into the lower world, filling the whole screen, merging the interior 'subjective' and 'objective' worlds. As Alma's own vocal narration becomes choked with emotion, the spilling

over of the interior subjective world into the objective one is represented by the words spilling down into the lower level.

On the other hand, the interactive strategy also admits the predominance of the objective frame, proper to the documentary genre, by occasionally removing access to the upper evocative layer. Agency is taken away at crucial and sometimes difficult moments, as a way of focusing the interactor's attention, forcing the viewer to confront Alma's reality squarely whether they would like to or not. In these moments, the loss of agency becomes a positive command on the part of the documentary makers: "Look at this truth – understand the truth of her story." The loss of agency at crucial moments like these, that force the viewer to concentrate on the lower 'objective' level, reassert the documentary frame and remind us that we are ultimately constrained by the harsh reality of Guatemalan poverty, which is the point of the whole documentary, and there is no final escape into the interior world of fantasy. Since Alma's story also centres around both choices made and conditions imposed upon her, the interplay between agency and loss of agency can also be seen to reflect the reality of Alma's life and of every life, reminding the interactor of the limits of freedom and choice.

3.2.4 Summary

As a testimonial within a documentary, Alma's testimony makes her a poster girl for the campaign against gang violence and the poverty cycle in Guatemala. She appears as both perpetrator and victim. The family photos and hand-drawn artwork that evoke emotion and a more personal touch in the upper evocative layer help portray Alma's subjective experience, but her experience is interesting to us not because of who she is as a person, but because she is a personalized representative of a 'type' – or rather, of two types, the gangster and the victim of the cycle of violence, poverty and alcohol abuse.

Much of the effectiveness of *Alma* rests on the skilfully interwoven complementarity of the two kinds of truth – the work first presents itself to the viewer as a 'documentary', stating its claim on objective truth from the outset, and this seems to be borne out by the talking head and photorealistic quality of the images. However, the subjective aspect of truth is also crucial to the story, and manifests itself through the hand-drawn elements and animation, as well as some point-of-view camerawork. Nonetheless, it is the objective frame which appears to assert itself more forcefully at key moments of the story, when the viewer loses control of agency and is 'forced' to look at Alma's face. As a consequence, the viewer is reminded that the life protagonist is a real person, experiencing horrific things in a world not unlike his / her own.

In summary, we can say that in *Alma*, an example of an interactive life story testimonial within a documentary, the relationship with the truth hinges first upon the establishment of credibility, and secondly upon the transmission of

the subjective truth of the life protagonist. The first effect is achieved by imposing a frame of objectivity – communicated by using the well-established tropes of film documentary to set up audience expectations that the work will transmit a message based in objective truth; the second by using hand-drawn animations and point-of-view shots to express her interior world.

The objective frame allows the documentary makers to take on the documentarian's informing and challenging role: the proposition that Alma's story is real and the poverty and gang violence are real-world problems at the same time provokes a challenge directed at the viewer: "What are you going to do about it?" Yet the subjective frame is no less necessary as it creates the emotional depth necessary to invoke audience pathos, empathy and understanding. Without the evocative layer, *Alma* would remain a flat, one-dimensional character, difficult to identify with. The childlike hand-drawn artwork and the background scenes of Guatemala give visual context and add emotional appeal. The role of interactivity is primarily to allow the blending of the two worlds – the external and internal view on the world of Alma's life – to take place according to the audience's choice, except at crucial important moments when the documentary makers re-assert their stance by forcing the viewer to focus only on the objective, external frame, reinforcing the message that this is a documentary lodged in historical, objective reality.

3.3 *The Cat and the Coup*: Player's avatar as the biographer's tool

So far we have seen interactivity at work in an autobiography to enact subjective truth, and in an interactive documentary to enable switching between subjective and objective perspective on a life story, while ultimately still reinforcing the objective documentary frame. We now turn to a biographical videogame: *The Cat and the Coup* (Brinson / ValaNejad 2011), a historical docugame about Mohammed Mossadegh, an Iranian politician. As a videogame in which the interactor controls a player character, this work has significantly different dynamics from both hypertext and interactive video documentary. The virtual embodiment of the interactor in the diegetic world creates a deeper level of involvement and interactivity, since the interactor becomes directly implicated as an actor within it, becoming 'incarnated' in the diegetic world in the form of Mossadegh's cat. This has implications for the creation of subjective and objective frames of truth, as we see in the analysis below.

Being an intensely political biography, to understand this work it is necessary to know for whom it was created. The game creators, Brinson and ValaNejad, from the University of California, conceived of the game as a way to educate youth in the United States about U.S.-Iranian relations in the 1950s and 1960s, to make them aware of the manipulative role their country had in bringing about the fall of the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. We first consider how the game constructs its claim on objective truth, al-

though it also apparently undercuts this claim through surrealism and symbolism; we then move on to consider how the life subject is construed and finally, whose subjective truth is being transmitted here.

3.3.1 Construction of objective truth claim, and apparent subversions through surrealism

As a biographical work about a historical personage, *The Cat and the Coup* makes certain objective truth claims; therefore the establishment of credibility through historical accuracy is important. However, because videogames like *The Cat and the Coup* typically involve rendered artwork, the videogame maker necessarily creates a world from the imagination. The storyworld does not, unlike a typical film documentary, have an inherent indexicality in its reference to the real world. Unlike *Alma*, whose real face we see on camera, the videogame image of Mossadegh is an artist's rendition, and so is the rest of the gameworld. This is a particular hurdle that the docugame maker must overcome. How then does such a game assert its connection with reality?

In this case, the discourse of objective realism is established textually by invoking the factual tone of verbal discourse characteristic of newspapers. The use of news headlines and dates at each tableau signal to the player that these events happened at a particular moment in the world's history. Although the headlines are not rendered visually as newspaper clippings but as part of an ornate Persian tableau, the clipped verbal tone characteristic of news headlines, prefaced by a date, immediately point the interactor to the extra-diegetic reality (the real world outside the game storyworld). The opening scene, for instance, depicts a tableau whose captions read "March 5, 1967" at the top and "MOHAMMAD MOSSADEGH IS DEAD: Former Prime Minister of Iran was 86; Nationalized Oil Industry in '51, Stirring Storm". Any interactor familiar with news headlines will recognise the news headline discourse type immediately as establishing a factual reference, despite the computer-generated artwork. Moreover, visually, other real-world political symbols such as the American flag and Westminster Cathedral also help establish a historical framework that the player easily recognises in the setting for the story.

Apparent subversion of the objective discourse

Unlike in *Alma*, the presence of photorealistic images in the game does not serve to re-create a sense of reality. In fact, there seems to be a cheeky, deliberate undercutting of the implicit truth claims of these images by using them in a surreal, often bizarre way. For instance, some of the most photorealistic images are: 1) a fountain pen, which forms the hinge upon which the second tableau balances – its function seems purely decorative; 2) the hand of a statue, from which dangles another tableau; and 3) a photo of a scowling bulldog in an or-

nate frame, which the player later realizes represents Winston Churchill. The indexicality of photography here is subverted and has no greater real-world value than the other artwork elements, reminding the player that in the game-world, everything is constructed.

Moreover, despite the real-world symbols of flags and landmarks, many unlifelike things happen, creating a surreal dreamlike storyworld in which the edges between reality and fantasy merge in a collage of traditional Persian artwork and bizarre characters such as a student with a stack of books for his head. Clearly unnatural things also happen: in the opening scene, after being pawed by his cat, the dead Mossadegh sits up, and the clock turns backward to signal the introduction into a strange, non-realistic diegetic gameworld in which things are likely to not make sense. These unreal situations bewilder the interactor by subverting expectations of what a nonfictional work set in the real world should be like.

Reality, symbolically represented

Cheeky subversions notwithstanding, the artwork as a whole, while upsetting expectations of what photorealistic images should achieve, in fact does make objective truth claims on another level – not by directly representing truth, but via symbolic representations. Throughout the game, images of anthropomorphic animal characters stand in for various important political figures such as the Shah (represented by a peacock), Churchill (a bulldog), Harry Truman (a rabbit) and the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States (a lizard). That these are used symbolically and not as referring literally to animals is signified by having them dress in human clothing. These non-player characters appear in the background, not as actual characters that 'Mossadegh' interacts with, except for Rabbit-Truman. Naïve players unfamiliar with political history may not fully understand the symbolic meaning contained in the artwork but merely sense that something important is being said until the facts are revealed at the end of the game. The interactor's perplexity is only likely to increase with each tableau as he / she continues doing things to Mossadegh as the game rules guide him to, but without understanding why.

3.3.2 Interactivity at the service of whose truth?

So far we have seen how the visuals of the game both construct and undercut the objective frame of the conventional documentary in *The Cat and the Coup*. We now consider how interactivity is used to present a subjective truth – in this case, not that of the life protagonist Mossadegh, but the biography makers' subjective angle on the objective truth: an argument, made interactively. To

make this argument, they employ the device of the cat, controlled by the interactor. But who is the cat, really?

The cat, who is the player's avatar, is supposedly Mossadegh's cat. However, as the cat-avatar, the player is actively involved in Mossadegh's downfall. Thus the player is guided to do things *to* the non-player character of Mossadegh in order for the game to progress. Mossadegh consistently becomes a victim of others' actions – apart from being arrested and court martialled by his countrymen and overthrown by crowds, even his own cat bullies him by spilling ink and oil on him. He is made to fall down repeatedly; twice, the goal is even to manoeuvre him into a position where he can be made to fall down. He is jumped on by his cat, squeezed so that he falls out of a tableau after surrendering by phone, and somewhat nonsensically, he is made to roll on the 'head' of the court martial 'judge' in the court martial scene, before falling through the floor. Clearly, none of the cat's actions are literally true to life; but the game makers use the player's / cat's actions as metaphors for showing what happened to the Iranian politician on a larger scale.

Mossadegh as victim

Mossadegh is thus presented to the player as victim, a passive recipient of actions done to him. Mossadegh does not act on his cat except for stroking it; it is the cat who acts more decisively on him. The only actions he performs in the game besides falling are picking up the inkpot, picking up papers, crawling on all fours out of Westminster Cathedral (signifying his defeat at the World Court), making a phone call, talking and pacing up and down. By comparison, the cat's actions are violent and even manipulative: tossing the inkpot, pushing objects off shelves, knocking off the judge's 'head' in court, pouring oil on Mossadegh and deliberately making him fall. Besides the appearance of a gaunt old man, the only thing that gives us a glimpse of Mossadegh's subjective reality are his external actions like writing and making a phone call. There is almost no indication of his subjective reality and internal emotional state, except through his nonverbal reactions such as burying his head in his hands when the mobs are pressing against the door. Mossadegh, the 'life subject', becomes effectively emptied of his own personality, his own subjectivity.

However, the photos of Mossadegh in the ending cutscene suggest a much more vigorous and determined character, as do other biographies like *The Mossadegh Project* (Norouzi 2011) and Farhad Diba's *Mohammad Mossadegh: A Political Biography* (1986). These more subjective elements of Mossadegh's existence are left out of the game: Although the game tells the story of Mossadegh's life, it reveals little about him personally. We are not told that he had a wife, or what his character was like – he is portrayed as the suffering victim, and that is all.

The question then arises: If the life protagonist's subjective truth is not the focus of this biographical life story, then whose subjective truth is the focus?

The answer lies in our earlier discussion of biography. In as far as the biographer is the "bridge" through which the reader gets to know the life subject, it is the biographer's version of the life subject that becomes the reader's. "The biographer's X is now [the reader's] X; Walter Jackson Bae's Johnson is now their Johnson…" (Backscheider 10). To the naïve player encountering Mossadegh for the first time in *The Cat and the Coup*, Brinson and ValaNejad's Mossadegh is now the player's (idea of) Mossadegh. This raises the interesting question of what sort of portrayal it is. Can we trust the impression the player gets of him as an accurate one? The agenda of truth Brinson and ValaNejad seek to promote – their version of the truth – is the awareness that Mossadegh was manipulated by world political forces, specifically by the British and the Americans, as well as those at home (the Shah). Obviously, then, *The Cat and the Coup* does not aim primarily at presenting the world as Mossadegh saw it, but rather to symbolically highlight a different truth, a political one that is important to the game makers.

3.3.3 The implicated, guilt-tripped player

Putting the interactor-player in the role of Mossadegh's cat is more than a narrative device to move the story from scene to scene; interactively, it makes the interactor complicit in what is being done to Mossadegh, even though the player may not be aware of this, and of his role as accomplice in the plot, until the end. The interactor's avatar-cat, supposedly on the side of Mossadegh, is shown at the end of the game to be on the same side as the bulldog (Churchill) and the lizard (the CIA). The game makers' avowed goal is to make the 'implied player' – whom they assume is an American – realise the role that the United States played in Iranian history, so as to better understand how the current situation of U.S.-Middle Eastern relations came about (cf. Brinson & ValaNejad 2012). By assigning the role of the cat to the player, the game makers imply that even if the player was not directly involved in – or even conscious of – the historical events and the political process, he too – as an American – is implicated in Iranian history. The whole storyworld turns out to be not so much about Mossadegh as about the player himself and his unconscious role in a part of world history that he perhaps never knew about. As the interactor plays out the story by making the cat do things to Mossadegh, whether directly or indirectly, he implicates himself in the plot and inadvertently takes part in 'bullying' Mossadegh.

3.3.4 Ending 'cutscene' video: The 'objective truth' revealed

After a game in which the naïve player is presumably left more and more puzzled by and curious about the sequence of events that Mossadegh is going

through, the 'truth' is finally revealed at the end of the game in a cutscene video, which plays in chronological order this time, detailing key moments of Mossadegh's life. The player moves through the same tableaus as before, but these are modified. Previously puzzling elements are explained. For instance, the lizard is only now revealed to be the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA logo stands next to the visual of a document, and the headline text (not in the game previously) reads "CIA approves $1,000,000 to bring about the fall of Mossadegh". Retrospectively, by linking this new information with the literal fall of Mossadegh during the game, the player is supposed to understand that the U.S.A. machinated the politician's fall from grace. The 'objective truth' is thus revealed and the mystery solved.

By viewing the whole story in chronological sequence, the player can now make sense of the events previously played, in a retrospective process of meaning making. It is also at this time that the player may suddenly become aware that he is being subtly accused by the docugame makers of being one of 'them', siding with the manipulative international forces, and that he to some extent has been identified by the game makers as partially – albeit indirectly – responsible for the fall of Mossadegh.

3.3.5 Summary

In dealing with questions of objective and subjective truth, the biographical docugame *The Cat and the Coup* uses different representational strategies from the photorealism of *Alma* and the experiential interactive metaphor of *Fitting the Pattern*. It makes its claims on credibility and objective truth by using newspaper headlines and dates, but afterward seeks to make an indirect persuasive argument which could be framed as: "U.S.-Iran relations are tense today because of what the United States (and by implication you, the game player) did to Mossadegh in the 1950s and 1960s." This argument relies on the use of symbols which represent political forces in history. Regarding objective and subjective truth, we can only conclude that this argument is the truth according to the game makers, who in this case take on the role of biographer but practically eclipse the 'I' of the protagonist. This truth is both subjective in terms of representing an opinion, and objective in terms of its claim to be grounded in reality.

At the end, many realities of the storyworld remain in doubt. Did Mossadegh really have a cat? We cannot know. Certain grey areas remain, typical of creative nonfiction. These grey areas, together with the exotic artwork from a strange land, leave the (implied) player feeling that there are many more things he / she does not know, which is after all the effect the game makers are trying to create. The message seems to be that the game is not out to represent objective truth as it exists 'out there' as much as it is a wake-up call to realise how much there is we do not know, represented by the many visual mysteries in the

artwork. What the game makers do present, however, is the argument for their subjective version of the objective truth that Mossadegh's downfall is to be blamed on international political interference.

4. Conclusion: Revealing truth and the many faces of interactivity

Interactive media allow for novel ways of telling stories. *Nonfiction* interactive narratives, in particular, because of their claims on objective and subjective realities, have a complicated relationship with the truth. In this paper, we have surveyed three kinds of interactive life story to show how interactivity is capable of highlighting different aspects of subjective and objective truth, depending on whether the life story is autobiographical, biographical or testimonial within a documentary.

In the autobiographical *Fitting the Pattern*, the author's subjective truth was made experiential in a metaphorical way: parental constraint was experienced through the interface constraints, and the fragmentary process of autobiographical identity construction was re-enacted through the interactor's non-immersive engagement with the work. In *Alma*'s testimony, the simultaneous presence of both the subjective inner world and the objective factual one allowed the documentarian to both portray Alma's subjective world and to claim credibility by using documentary conventions; it also allowed for the occasional reassertion of the objective documentary frame by the removal of the evocative layer. Finally, *The Cat and the Coup*, using interactivity as a narrative strategy, made a claim on objective truth but from a subjectively opinionated viewpoint. By placing the interactor in the role of the cat, it implicated the interactor as a guilty party, haplessly complicit in the overthrow of the life protagonist.

Studies on interactivity often appear to regard it as a single, univocal property of a medium. Questions such as "What is interactivity?" (cf. Svanæs 1999, Crawford 2002) betray this assumption, as do the multiple attempts to 'define interactivity' and to group interactivity and its effects under a single conceptual umbrella.[22] When considered as a narrative strategy, however, we have seen that interactivity works in many different ways according to 1) *what* the interactor interacts with, e.g. controlling an avatar works differently from a narrative perspective compared to clicking an interface button, and 2) *how* the interactivity is being used – the feedback effects of the interaction. A work that employs the sudden loss of agency is using a different narrative device compared to another work that uses interactivity in a more conventional way, e.g. click to pick up something.

The different ways in which interactivity is harnessed and interwoven into the life story therefore help construct the story in one way or another, highlighting either subjective or objective truth, or both. The ability to move between layers in *Alma* for instance constitutes the interactive video as a site of

negotiation, in which the interactor oscillates between the private subjective life of Alma's interior world and the slightly more dominant documentary discourse based on objective truth. The more straightforward use of interactive metaphor in *Fitting the Pattern* expresses the author's subjective truth in an experiential but symbolic way, while the cat-as-avatar in *The Cat and the Coup* again situates the interactor in a position of contestation of meaning – there are several competing voices, and although the interactor is identified with the cat-avatar, providing an ostensibly neutral observer-focalizer, other subtle claims to truth are made through visuals and the interactions themselves, and it is in fact the subjective voice of the biographers that dominates the discourse. The various uses of interactivity, then, also imply different ways of relating with the truth.

The present study has sought to reveal some ways in which interactivity is used to present various aspects of subjective and objective truth in interactive life stories. The study of interactivity as a narrative device is still in its early stages and there is much scope for expanding this knowledge. For instance, we have examined instances of three life story genres, but other subgenres exist; media-wise, other variations of interactive narrative involving other modalities should be investigated as well, such as touchscreen-based apps. Moreover, even within web-based narratives, structural differences such as the linearity or non-linearity of a text will affect how truth is represented. Future work should also study the production and authorship process, since many interactive works are collaborations: In what ways does the involvement of an entire artwork and production team change the subjectivity of the life story, for instance, in *Alma*? From the reception angle, the implied audience is yet another area for study, given that the truths in a work (and perceptions about truth in a work) are absorbed differently by different audiences: How would an Iranian youth react to *The Cat and the Coup*, compared to an American? Finally, the central role that metaphors appear to occupy in the works, which emerged in our analyses, also presents another area for study: Do metaphors in general function to provide life storytellers an interactive way to express their truths? As interest in nonfictional interactive narratives continues to grow, it is expected that more examples will emerge, which will eventually allow a fuller exploration of the above issues, hopefully culminating in the setting up of a tentative framework or model to indicate the varied ways in which life narratives and media combine with interactivity to present aspects of the truth.

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[1] Smith and Watson (2010) suggest no less than sixty genres of life narrative, but these include very topic-specific distinctions such as autothanatography and travel narrative; for our purposes, these general distinctions will suffice.
[2] Some autobiographers do however self-critically recognise the tentative, constructed, subjectively limited and possibly biased nature of their own worldview. Lynda Barry, for instance, in *One! Hundred! Demons!* constantly queries self-reflexively, "Who knows which moments make us who we are? Some of them? All of them? The ones we never really thought of as anything special?" (36) as does Christine Wilks (2008) in her lecture notes on *Fitting the Pattern*: "Many people encouraged me to stretch the 'truth' and push at the boundaries of creative non-fiction, which after all are very flexible, and this is why I added '… embroidered' to my title. I was very aware that I wasn't creating a true picture of my mother and I wanted the freedom to misrepresent her for my own creative ends. I felt that adding '…embroidered' gave me the creative license I needed, but in the end I find I haven't strayed too far from the 'facts' anyway. Although whether anyone else would recognise my mother from 'Fitting the Pattern' is another matter."
[3] See for instance Michael Renov's (1986, 71-72) claim that "the documentary is the cinematic idiom that most actively promotes the illusion of immediacy insofar as it forswears 'realism' in favour of a direct, ontological claim to the 'real'. Every documentary issues a 'truth claim' of a sort, positing a relationship to history which exceeds the analogical status of its fictional counterpart."
[4] Sobchack (1999, 246) characterises the "mode of documentary consciousness" as looking "both *at* and *through* the screen" [emphases in original] – not only at objects represented on the screen, but *through* the screen to the reality to which the documentary refers.
[5] As Dai Vaughan (1999, 154) astutely observed, "Documentary, after all, can tell lies; and it can tell lies because it lays claim to a form of veracity which fiction doesn't". Objective truth is a concept that stems from a realist, empiricist philosophy and is based on the view that reality exists independently of subjective perception. We discuss this in further detail later.
[6] Backscheider (1999, xv) offers a nuanced explanation of this relationship in the introduction to *Reflections on Biography*: "There is nothing like writing biography. The biographer becomes the subject's closest ally and bitterest enemy. All biographers must be their subjects' advocates, taking up the burden of explaining lives and why they were led as they were. And so they become closer than mother, wife, school friend; they see through the subject's eyes, try to feel exactly what hurt about each painful event. But only an enemy touches the very soul, probes until the deepest, most shameful secrets and the most raw aches lie exposed, trembling in the light under the surgeon's dissecting tool. We do that no matter how passionately we love and respect our 'subject'".
[7] In either case, it is clear that a subjective element enters, even through the fundamental and apparently neutral process of fact selection: "Above all, biographers are decision-makers whose decisions matter. From a variety of perspectives, they judge and evaluate, and the act of interpretation is ever present, inseparable from every other action." (Backscheider 1999, xxi)

[8] A cautionary note: It may be tempting to create a dichotomy between a personal-subjective mode of storytelling versus an impersonal-objective mode, and to align 'subjective' with 'fictional' and 'objective' with 'factual' because the latter is verifiable while the former, based on memory and self-report, can be biased and is intersubjectively unverifiable. However, what we are faced with are in fact two different epistemologies of truth: Claims to objective truth occur because they are grounded in a discourse rooted in a scientific worldview which admits only externally observable, verifiable and corroborrable evidence; claims to subjective truth, as we mentioned earlier, rest instead upon authenticity of experience as the ultimate touchstone of truth. This does not mean that subjective truth is not real, but that it uses a different yardstick – that of authentic personal experience.

[9] We see this, for instance, in the unquestioned authority of Alma's testimony in *Alma: A Tale of Violence*, where the lower track draws upon all the conventions (and by implication the authority) of the talking head documentary, positioning her as an "expert" testimony giver whose authority comes from her personal lived experience.

[10] Jill Godmilow (2002, 5-6), for instance, heartily critiques the assumptions which lie at the heart of documentary film: "In the documentary cinema, the particular problem with the world-as-knowable idea is that *as* you're seeing (and theoretically able to be knowing) something about the real world, at the same time, the film is spinning you into a complicated and subtle relationship with that 'knowable' thing, which is informed by specific political, social, and cultural conceits. This relationship to 'what you know' is not innocent: it is caught up in a web of ideology, i.e., relationships, attitudes, received ideas about the thing represented." [emphasis in original] Bart Layton's *The Imposter* (2012) is an excellent example of a documentary film that plays with viewer expectations of truth and leaves the viewer questioning which version of the story is true. In these cases, competing subjective voices sometimes challenge one another's claims to tell the truth. This is not the case, however, with our present case studies, which use different complementary strategies to build up a single strong and unquestioned argument in which the objective and subjective discourses support each other rather than competing for credibility.

[11] See the introduction in Page (2013) for a fuller discussion.

[12] As Marie-Laure Ryan (2006) and other scholars (cf. Ong 1999, Keen 2011, Thon 2013) have pointed out, different media privilege different sorts of meaning making and discourse. Even when we refer to the subset of works in the "nonfiction" domain, thereby excluding expressly fictional works, the inherent qualities peculiar to print, painting, photography, film and music, as well as the conventions and cultural expectations that have grown up around each of these media influence audience reception and result in the different media (and their associated sensory modalities) constructing their truth claims differently.

[13] The terms 'new media' and 'interactive media' are often used almost interchangeably, since interactivity is a key characteristic of new media (cf. Straubhaar et al. 2015, 24). 'New media' is an umbrella term that applies to various kinds of digital, electronically-based media which rose to prominence at the end of the twentieth century, including email, webpages and video games. Lister et al (2009) provide an in-depth and thoughtful discussion of the term, including its ideological connotations. In this sentence we have chosen to use the term 'new media' to highlight the cultural characteristics assigned to it, such as remediation and fragmentation. 'Interactive media', by contrast, has more currency among human-computer interaction scholars as it highlights the technical aspect of interactivity.

[14] This is particularly clear in works like *Alma*, where hand-drawn artwork and painting are interspersed with documentary film footage and photographs, and *The Cat and the Coup* which deliberately and playfully juxtaposes computer generated graphics with classical Persian art drawings and photorealistic inserts of Westminster Cathedral and animal heads.

[15] Decades of scholarship have not yet yielded a universally accepted definition of interactivity, despite much discussion. For our purposes we draw primarily upon that proposed by Chris Crawford (2002, 3): "A cyclic process in which two actors alternately listen, think, and speak." In human-computer interaction, the second actor is the computer system which reacts differently depending on the input from the human first actor. We also draw upon the definition of Kiousis (2002, 372): "Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency)." In these case studies the one-to-one communication happens between the interactor and the computer, and the 'reciprocal message exchanges' would refer to the feedback given by the computer in response to interactor input.

[16] 'Procedural rhetoric' is a term coined by Ian Bogost (2007) to refer to the way the rules of interaction in an interactive work can be seen as making an argument, by means of the things it makes the interactor do and experience.
[17] For instance, a simple linear scrolling web page, a complex site with multiple hyperlinks and embedded videos, an interactive video and videogames can all be considered examples of 'interactive narrative'.
[18] For further detailed explanation and examples of close reading as method, see Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) and Tanenbaum and Bizzocchi (2009).
[19] Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) propose close readings as a way to understand digital games; Bardzell and Bardzell (2008) propose interaction criticism as a tool that can be applied to any interaction design artifact. Neither of them focus specifically on interactive narratives, and while the first applies to a very specific medium (video games), the second applies to a vastly broader category of artifacts. Nonetheless, the direction they take in approaching interactive media artifacts in an interpretative way appears fruitful and conducive to a clearer understanding of how these interactive works create meaning for the user.
[20] For a deeper discussion of autobiography and the autobiographical pact, refer to Smith and Watson (2010).
[21] Taking the lead from Douglas and Hargadon's (2001) discussion of the pleasures of immersion and engagement as contrasting phenomena, throughout this paper we have drawn upon the term 'immersion' to refer to the interactor's experience of being completely absorbed in the diegetic world to the extent of ignoring or momentarily forgetting his surroundings, and 'engagement' to refer to an experience that "disrupt[s] readers' immersion in the text, obliging them to assume an extra-textual perspective on the text itself, as well as on the schemas that have shaped it and the scripts operating within it" (156).
[22] Eric Zimmerman's (2004) classification of four types of interactivity would be a noteworthy exception.