"The New Heroism" in Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"

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Abstract

This article analyses the concept of "the new heroism" in Jennifer Egan's 2012 Twitter fiction "Black Box." The article compares the Twitter fiction reader to the video game player and applies some notions from video games in navigating the digital environment of Twitter. Moving on to the fictional description of heroism within the text, the article considers the process of digitisation described as it affects the human body and individual identity, creating "digital heroes." Ideas of gender and sexual trauma transform the female body into a political weapon through digitisation. Final comments connect the text's depiction of death and the afterlife to the preliminary discussion of video games, enabling the protagonist to exist forever as a digital file—or "saved game." Conclusions draw out connections between the digital collective of the heroism in Egan's text and the collaborative nature of electronic literature.

Keywords

Twitter fiction; Jennifer Egan; Black Box; technology; heroism; gender; sexual trauma; death.

Content Note

This paper includes discussion of trauma and sexual assault. Reader discretion is advised.

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Introduction

Jennifer Egan's Twitter fiction "Black Box" (2012) depicts a citizen agent on a high-risk mission in a futuristic world where bodies can be embedded with technology and weaponry. The agent has agreed to sacrifice the "petty pains and loves" of her individual life and undergo this bodily modification in order to join the "dazzling collective" (Egan, 2012, p. 50) and become a digital hero. Published two years after Egan's Pulitzer-prize winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), "Black Box" carries on many thematic and formal preoccupations that took centre stage in this novel, and even takes one of the characters from the former as its protagonist. Significant concepts carried over are Egan's formal experimentation and her interest in terrorism and national security. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* adopts a puzzle-like narrative structure that switches between character, time, and media, and meditates on 9/11 as a significant touchstone in American memory through this unique structure.[1] "Black Box" continues these thematic interests and disrupts many literary expectations and norms by using the social media platform Twitter to publish the text in short fragments, as shown in Figure 1.

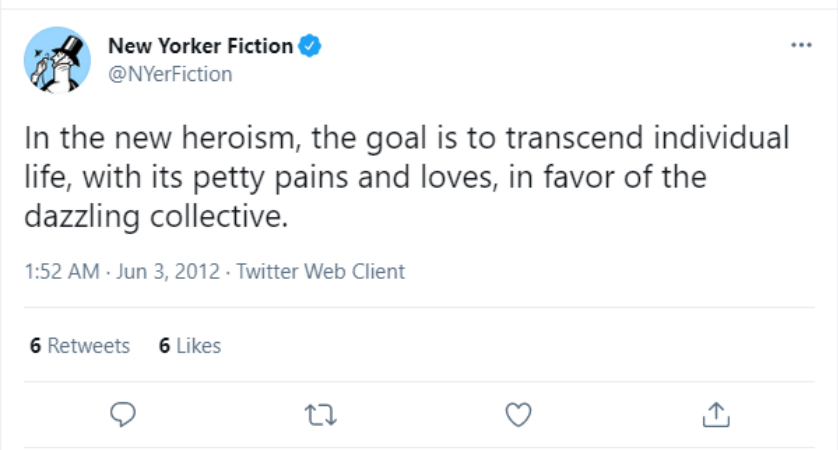

Figure 1. Screenshot of "Black Box" Tweet (@NYerFiction, June 3, 2012. Twitter.) Screenshot by the author.

In "Black Box," the response to terrorism turns into a conception of heroism as described in Figure 1, encouraging a united front and rejection of individualism. The text is compiled of recorded thoughts from a citizen agent on a mission to collect data from an enemy subject, which she does through surveillance equipment that has been embedded within her body. Technology in "Black Box" is presented as the ultimate weapon for subterfuge, allowing the agent to digitally upload mission logs and findings, contributing to a wider network of agents who will learn from her mission. The agent sacrifices her personal safety, privacy, and relationships—encountering physical, emotional, and sexual violence in her mission. Technology is also a key aspect of the text, as

[1] For further thoughts on themes of terrorism and war in Egan's work, see Power (2021).

"Black Box" was disseminated by *The New Yorker*'s Twitter account (@NYerFiction) in 140-character tweets (one released every minute for one hour a day over ten days) in a unique form of Twitter serialisation, experimenting with the potential of Twitter fiction and creating a piece of digital fiction with an equally digital protagonist. This article investigates how "Black Box" utilises some tropes of video game design in its narrative and the interactive landscape of Twitter, and analyses the text's depiction of heroism as a digital collective.

In *Electronic Literature* (2008), Hayles notes that electronic literature is dually influenced by "expectations formed by print" and by "the powerhouses of contemporary culture, particularly computer games, films, animations, digital arts, graphic design, and electronic visual culture" (p. 4). Electronic literature, then, becomes a "'hopeful monster' (as geneticists call adaptive mutations) composed of parts taken from diverse traditions that may not always fit neatly together" (Hayles, 2008, p. 4). These "powerhouses of contemporary culture" have established methods of integrating textual narrative into image-based environments, which fiction can learn from as it attempts to collage visual and textual narrative. Hayles's description of electronic literature as a "hopeful monster" is reminiscent of the language often used to describe the posthuman, a patchwork of human and technology with great potential if carried out correctly.[2] This resemblance between electronic literature and the posthuman is particularly relevant to "Black Box," which depicts both concepts in its Twitter form and in the upgraded body of its protagonist.

This patchwork potential is also present in the text's definition of heroism: "In the new heroism, the goal is to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and loves, in favour of the dazzling collective" (Egan, 2012, p. 50). This quotation highlights the definition of heroism as a collective journey and as a rewriting of the human experience, viewing central aspects of human life, such as love and loss, as futile and self-centred. "Black Box" explores heroism as a surpassing of these trivial human experiences, tying the journey of becoming a hero to the process of digitisation in which digital abilities are prioritised over those of the human. The path to becoming part of the dazzling collective involves abolishing corporeal limits through technological upgrades that embed surveillance equipment and weaponry within the central character's flesh body. Breaking embodied limitations occurs in the body of the text itself and the structure of Twitter fiction, which disrupts the traditional boundaries of the material book. By injecting fiction into this unexpected landscape, the text questions expectations of narrative and enables

[2] Hayles (1999) calls the posthuman "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, . . . whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (p. 2).

comparison with other forms of digital narratives such as video games, which offer a uniquely participatory form of storytelling.

This article examines the relationship between digital form and the idea of collective heroism in Egan's text, using notions of heroism found within video games as a reference point. In analysing the details of the digital heroism in "Black Box," this paper focuses on the impact of digitisation upon the human body and on the specific requirements of the body chosen for the task—noting the significance of the agent as female and the gendered dynamic of using the female body as a political tool and weapon. Referencing Haraway's (1985) notion of the cyborg, my analysis asks how the technologisation of the body in Egan's text reveals the social and political influences upon the female body. These various aspects of the text and human becoming digitised highlights the emphasis on a digital collective which both augments the body and fractures or even damages it, all in order to "transcend individual life . . . in favour of the dazzling collective."

Reader as Player in "Black Box"

There are many aspects of Egan's text which enable a reading of the Twitter fiction reader as a type of player who is able to navigate and interact with the text, and also inhabit the role of a future agent-in-training. This complicates the distinction between video games and fictional narratives, envisioning Twitter fiction as a site for expanding the role of the reader. Regarding physical engagement with the text, Ciccoricco (2012) comments that in digital fiction, a representation of the user is made manifest through the mouse pointer. This introduces "a direct connection between the topographical space of the interface and the human gesture of the user" (Bardini, 1997, as cited in Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 262). There is a strong parallel between the digital fiction reader and the video game player, with the pointer acting as the representation of the user instead of the onscreen avatar typically found in video games, inserting a digital mediator between reader and text. This parallel is interesting to apply to "Black Box," where the Twitter fiction reader is simultaneously, or perhaps foremost, a Twitter user, who uses the tools of the computer to navigate through the social media site and track their progress within the text. This aligns with Aarseth's (1997) claim that ergodic literature and cybertexts contain a "nontrivial effort . . . required to allow the reader to traverse the text," contrasting "nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial" (p. 1). Analysis of "Black Box" necessitates a similar focus on what is being read *from* rather than just what is being read, as the Twitter format requires these nontrivial efforts to navigate the platform and access the fiction, rather than the ease of opening a print novel with no obstacles between reader and text or digital interaction required from the reader.

The Twitter format also aids in explaining the rules of the text: The instructional layout of the Twitter publication separates the text into short phrases, reading like an instruction manual. These instructions often relate to the usage of the technology implanted in the agent's body—this technology is both her toolkit for collecting the information that is the goal of her mission and her weaponry for self-defence. In Egan's story, these tools are revealed function by function and explained again in an instructional format. For example, the agent explains how to record audio: "activate the microphone by pressing the triangle of cartilage across your ear opening" and "pressing your left thumb (if right handed) against your left middle fingertip begins recording" (Egan, 2012, pp. 11, 14). These lessons on how to use the implants are reminiscent of the introductory scenes of many video games, where the purpose is to acclimate the player to the rules of the game and the technical details of how to move and act. The use of hands and fingers to manipulate the technology embedded under the agent's skin further enforces this comparison, as the body is operated like a console. Reading "Black Box" requires similar movements, relying upon manipulation of the reader's phone or mouse and computer screen to progress through the text. However, this tutorial does not precede the "real" narrative, as is often the case in video games, where the player would first watch and learn before playing.[3] Instead, every statement within "Black Box" acts as a tutorial for the future agents who will learn from these instructions and will be equipped with the knowledge they need for their missions. The skippable nature of gaming tutorials is then removed, with the instructions integrated throughout the text as each action or event provides lessons to learn from. Egan inverts the notion of the gaming tutorial, firstly as these lessons cannot be put into practice by the reader, and secondly as the lessons pull double duty of both educating the future agent and building the narrative itself—demonstrating the actions the agent must complete accurately to safely accomplish her mission. Thus, the tutorial has real stakes, as the agent herself is at points harmed—becoming temporarily blinded and almost being discovered by her target. While a guide for future agents, this tutorial is not a safe learning platform as in a video game environment.

Moreover, the explanations of the many functions and actions available to the agent creates a sense of false freedom or autonomy. Simons (2007) states that "the trick of the trade of game design is indeed to make the player *believe* she is in control" ("External Observers Versus Immersed Players," para. 8, emphasis in the original). This is notably achieved in video games through limited options such as dialogue trees that enforce rules while enabling some decisions on the part of the player. In "Black Box," the agent may appear in control, but there are

[3] This is not the case with all video game tutorials, which vary greatly. Many games experiment with the tutorial notion by integrating it across levels and into gameplay, or even enabling players to die within the tutorial—notably *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011).

similar limitations to freedom. Firstly, the story is already written; there is no option as to how it will play out. This points to the vital difference between readers and players: "A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 4). Aarseth's (1997) definition of a reader relies on their inability to alter the narrative outcome in any way, as a passive spectator rather than an involved player. This differs from the range of endings within a typical video game, where the player's actions determine which route is taken through a number of options presented to them, or at least, their actions result in either a win or loss. In "Black Box," while the plot is revealed to the reader in a fragmented manner which creates uncertainty, it is in fact fixed. Secondly, the functions in "Black Box" are tied to specific moments and times; the agent is less an autonomous individual than a programmed machine. This is similar to the limitations of a video game, where the range of actions and tools often are only useful or accessible at programmed moments. Egan plays with these tropes of video games—the idea of tutorials, the contingency of gameplay, and the impression of control—but deploys them in a linear novelistic context that strips them of their interactivity and formal purposes.

Although Egan produced the text in a novelistic manner, when read in tandem with Aarseth's (1997) work on cybertexts, analysis of "Black Box" complicates the distinction between games and narratives. While the reader in "Black Box" is a spectator in that they cannot impact the action within the text, some aspects of Aarseth's definition of cybertexts and interactivity are also applicable to "Black Box." For instance, Aarseth upholds the "intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange" (1997, p. 1) and conceives of cybertexts as "a way to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena . . . perceived as outside of, or marginalized by, the field of literature" (1997, p. 18). In Egan's text, the Twitter medium is an integral part of the literary exchange, requiring specific engagement in reading and technical access. Furthermore, we can view Twitter fiction similarly as a way to expand the scope of literary studies, making the technology carry a fictional narrative in a manner it was not exactly intended for. Aarseth claims that "the cybertext reader is a player, a gambler; the cybertext is a game-world or world-game; it is possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts" (1997, p. 4). Tying the distinctions between games and narratives to the differences between players and readers leads me to ask whether the reader of "Black Box" can similarly be viewed as a player.

As it is hosted on Twitter, "Black Box" becomes one narrative thread within the vast twitterverse. Through the tools of the platform, such as replying, retweeting, and tagging, the reader can build upon the existing narrative and explore the expansive landscape—following electronic

pathways to discover other portions of the social networking site. While the text itself is closed in the lack of narrative options presented to the reader, using Twitter as a platform for publication allows and expects readers/users to create these new pathways and processes that Aarseth speaks of. The act of reading becomes a collective effort, as each users' additions and links are communal, visible to all other Twitter users. Investigating these aspects of cybertext within "Black Box" highlights the value of these interactions between platform and reader/user and the potential for exploration beyond the set narrative.

There are further echoes of video game influences within the style of address and the narrative tense utilised by Egan. Egan's poetic prose is carefully collated to build the world of the text and centralise the goal and dangers of the mission. Precup's (2015) article on the posthuman body in "Black Box" provides an overview of how this is technically achieved:

> "Black Box" reads like a mix between an instructions manual and a mission log . . . The architecture of the text is based on effectively concise and well-balanced sentences, consisting mostly of a mix of conditionals laying down procedural steps, directives and prescriptive statements, strings of corrective recommendations that acknowledge the fallibility of procedures and their impossibility to forecast all possible outcomes, guidelines for manipulation, dissimulation, and seduction techniques, patriotic motivational slogans, and terse observations with aphoristic inflections. (p. 173)

This careful architecture mirrors video game narratives, which typically inform players of their objectives and resources, serving "as motivation for the player, giving them a goal to achieve" (Stone, 2019). This is particularly true of pre-established video game narratives, in which "interactivity and randomness have no impact upon the story" (Picucci, 2011, section 3.1., para. 1) when players' actions follow the intended narrative and thus the pre-programmed narrative must cover all bases. The scheduled and planned nature of Egan's text adopts a similarly informative, blunt, didactic form—each line written provides instruction:

> Move close to the sketches you wish to photograph, allowing them to fill your field of vision.
> Hold very still.
> A flash is far more dramatic in total darkness.
> An epithet in another language, followed by "What the fuck was that?," means you overestimated your Designated Mate's handset absorption.
> A bright, throbbing total blindness means that you neglected to cover your non-camera eye. (Egan, 2012, p. 30)

The text is written in the second person ("you"), centring the reader in the action and making them feel as if the instructions apply to them, as well as reflecting the actions of the agent. This is similar to the text in video games, where instructions doubly apply to the avatar (or the player-character) and the players controlling them. The reader learns the rules of the game and understands the feeling of danger and immediacy through these blunt and emotionless descriptions, which reveal the physical consequences of any mistakes. However, while Simons (2007) notes that game players "know that whatever happens to their avatars in the gameworld, nothing nasty will happen to them" ("External Observers Versus Immersed Players," para. 6), in "Black Box," this concept is a little more complicated. While the Twitter fiction reader is in the same position as the video game player, within the world of the text, the person reading these thoughts is a future agent who will be exposed to all the same threats as described in the text. The reader then stands in the position of another agent; the entire narrative of "Black Box" is a recording of the agent's thoughts, a recording that "will serve as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work" (Egan, 2012, p. 14). The text is then an instruction manual based on past experiences, a guide that will be passed onto the next agent, the next player in the game. This contributes to the feeling of "realness" for the reader, who receives the text as the future agent would, learning the rules and risks of the job, and thus creating the impression of a real training process.

Collective Heroism in "Black Box"

This idea of the text as a manual shared between users is a key component of "Black Box"'s collective heroism. Just as the agents in "Black Box" share their training experience, they also share the glory. The use of the second person positions the reader as a player, whilst uniting all agents by addressing them collectively as "you." This second-person address is reminiscent of text-based adventure games like *Zork* (Infocom, 1977) and *Adventureland* (Adams, 1978), where the player navigates the game by inputting short directives with the keyboard. The instructional style of Egan's text mirrors these textual directives and upholds the text as the tool of navigation and exploration. As Ip (2011) states, these early games "allow[ed] users to engage in fantasy worlds purely via textual descriptions and conversations with other players and game characters" (p. 104). The focus on textuality in these games centralises the point of comparison with "Black Box": "their heavy reliance on text and full-word/phrase commands are qualitatively different from the games . . . where visuals replace text descriptions" (Ostenson, 2013, p. 75). Thus, there is a particular affinity between these text-based games and Egan's text, which uses textuality rather than image to inject fictional narrative into the social media landscape. Parallels can also be drawn to "choose your own adventure" narratives, which began as children's books but have also inspired digital creations, such as the interactive film *Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018). In addition, the

original *Choose Your Own Adventure* series (1979–1998) utilised a second person address to frame the reader as the protagonist, inspiring a similar impression of immediacy as in Egan's text. These influences within Egan's Twitter fiction highlights the legacy of game narratives and points to a sense of nostalgia in replicating this form of play with a newer text-based technology.

This collective address also allows Egan to keep the name of her character anonymous throughout the text. However, Egan has confirmed that the agent is an extension of the character Lulu from her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (Gee, 2012). This link impacts readings of "Black Box" in a myriad of ways, but for this article's scope, it is Egan's refusal to acknowledge who this character is within the text itself, while having an answer ready, that is most interesting. Leaving the character unnamed reflects that this one agent's experience is not unique and acknowledges the multitude when referring to the individual. Choosing to anonymise Lulu and propel her into a future world is especially significant because in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Lulu is a young, tech-savvy marketing student, who is described as "clean," with no tattoos or piercings. Lulu's technologically upgraded body in "Black Box" shows a radical transformation from this "clean," abstaining state, removing a defining characteristic of her past persona. Selecting an individual with a tangible backstory to transform into one of a multitude of nameless agents within a collective group, emphasises the mutable nature of individual identity in "Black Box"; past experiences and defining features are subsumed by the collective—shared identity becomes a prerequisite for shared glory.

Black Box demonstrates an emerging form of heroism in this transformation—a digital heroism, which foregrounds technology as the transformational and heroic component augmenting these "clean" bodies. This term—digital heroism—is one way to anchor the text's multiplicity, as the bodily upgrading in the text is an intentional, repeated, and shared experience—not a unique case like the accidental Frankenstein's monster. The agent's body is technologically enhanced and transformed into a highly efficient tool to gather, store, and transfer information. The reader does not see this process of upgrading, but the text reveals the motivation for such bodily alterations in its description of heroism as a kind of utopian digital collective:

> You are one of hundreds, each a potential hero.
> Technology has afforded ordinary people a chance to glow in the cosmos of human achievement. . . .
> Knowing that you are one of hundreds shouldn't feel belittling.
> In the new heroism, the goal is to merge with something larger than yourself.
> In the new heroism, the goal is to throw off generations of self involvement.

> In the new heroism, the goal is to renounce the American fixation with being seen and recognized.
> In the new heroism, the goal is to dig beneath your shiny persona. (Egan, 2012, pp. 21–22)

This excerpt reads like a manifesto for this new digital heroism. The anaphora "In the new heroism, the goal is to" echoes memorised motivational slogans, perhaps from the recruitment and training processes. This corporate tone is blended with poetic motivational phrases encouraging a positive view of this "merging." In this new heroism, the agent essentially becomes a military tool, as her body is not her own property and her thoughts are recorded as a mission log. This invasion of privacy and loss of bodily autonomy is justified and deemed desirable through the idea of the heroic collective; here Egan enables a critique of heroism through highlighting the sacrificial, self-effacing component of this voluntary service. Technology is the pathway to glory, allowing "ordinary people" to become superhuman in their abilities and contribute to this collective effort.

The loss of individuality is not merely ideological: It is an actual sacrifice made within the text. The technology embedded within the agent's body begins to take over and sacrifice her personal history, not just altering her bodily form but compromising her cognitive data and memories. For instance, any personal reflection or emotional response is ignored by the embedded equipment—"Your pounding heartbeat will not be recorded" (Egan, 2012, p. 12)—or discouraged as input—"Where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them" (Egan, 2012, p. 14). Characterising personal thoughts as an intrusion within the individual's own body then foregrounds the technology and frames the agent's body as a storage device rather than a corporeal expression of individuality.[4] Not only are the agent's thoughts, feelings, and observations excluded where they are not relevant to the task, but as the data collected demands more and more storage space within her body, it begins utilising her own cognitive faculties to import information. This depletes the agent's own resources, rewriting her cognitive structures to better support these requirements:

> You will feel the surge as the data flood your body.
> The surge may contain feeling, memory, heat, cold, longing, pain, even joy.
> Although the data are alien, the memories dislodged will be your own:
> Peeling an orange for your husband in bed on a Sunday, sunlight splashing the sheets;
> The smoky earthen smell of the fur of your childhood cat;

[4] This brings to mind Hayles's (1999) "pattern" and "presence" terminology when speaking of the value of human embodiment and the dangers of viewing the body as merely a vehicle for data (p. 18).

> The flavour of the peppermints your mother kept for you inside her desk. (Egan, 2012, p. 39)

Absorbing this data dislodges personal memories. The technology moves from a detached addition to the agent's body to an active editor, rearranging and deleting components where it sees fit. This data surge is described as a sensory experience, containing "feeling, memory, heat, cold, longing, pain, even joy," yet, it removes important sense memories from the agent's own mind. The moments listed convey the mundane but essential sensory attachments that create a personal history—from weekly routines with a spouse to early sense memories of childhood.

Similar to the idea of the tutorial becoming integrated across the entire text, the character backstory is embedded here within moments of action, instead of being given at the start. As highlighted in Ip's (2011) article on the use of narrative in video games,

> Back stories are usually presented just before a game begins or seen written on the back of game packaging or in its instruction manual to capture a player's attention as well as set the scene for the entire game. (p. 112)

Egan subverts this convention by providing a backstory for the reader only as it is deleted for the character. This opposes the chronology of Campbell's (1949) hero's journey often utilised in game narratives, where "the player first meets the hero and is introduced to the hero's background, typically via the back story" (Ip, 2011, p. 112). These memories, and likely many more in between, are eradicated, simply lost as a sacrifice in exchange for incoming data. This process of eradication contributes to the creation of a digital collective, as the agent's bodies become homogenous and lack the distinguishing aspects of their personalities and memories. By removing these identifying memories and thoughts, the text makes true some of the goals from the new heroism manifesto, such as throwing off self-involvement and renouncing the fixation with being seen and recognised. It also focusses on technology affording the ordinary to shine, as the heroes do not glow as individual human beings, but as collective containers of information displaying the heroic contributions of technology.

Gender and Heroism in "Black Box"

A defining feature of the bodies that make up this digital collective is their shared gender. The agents are called "beauties" because they hide in plain sight as the beautiful dates of important men: "When men begin serious talk, beauties are left to themselves" (Egan, 2012, p. 15). The beauty guise utilised for this position requires a traditionally attractive woman who is not out of place in this scenario and who is perceived as completely non-threatening. This relies on a view of women as innocent and powerless, ideas that are further endorsed by the acts of

technological upgrading required for the selected service agents, which could communicate that a beautiful woman alone is not fit for the task at hand. Here, Haraway's (1990) comments on technologisation and the cyborg can be considered. Haraway explains that "communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide" (p. 164). This notion of technology re-crafting the human, combined with the focus on female bodies and the informatics of domination that enforces gender roles and hierarchies, perfectly applies to the new heroism of Egan's text. "Black Box" transforms women's bodies into spy weaponry and nicknames them "beauties," hiding their abilities and purpose under a layer of gender stereotypes.

The focus on the agent's appearance touches upon stereotypical depictions of female figures within popular media, which often present female bodies as a "spectacle—body to be looked at, place of sexuality, and object of desire" (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 4). Sherman (1997) notes that female characters in action and adventure games often wear impractical and sexualised outfits, and that, because of this clothing, the characters are not viewed as capable heroes. This causes players—especially male players—to be reluctant to select them (p. 254). Along the same lines, Sarkeesian's *Lingerie Is Not Armour* (2016) explores the discrepancy in suitable clothing between male and female characters in videogames, highlighting that female characters are valued for their sexual desirability rather than their skill. These assumptions are utilised and twisted in "Black Box," as the agent—the hero of the text—uses this "beauty" aesthetic as a cover to disguise her intentions and abilities, relying on gendered assumptions to keep her cover secure. Sarkeesian notes a recent tendency to justify the sexualisation of female game characters: Cortana from the *Halo* franchise (Bungie, 2001—present) is said to be naked in order to catch the attention of male characters, and Quiet from *Metal Gear Solid V* (Kojima Productions, 2015) is scantily clad because she breathes and drinks through her skin. Egan's "Black Box" similarly shows a hyper-awareness of the female body as an intentional method of distraction—showing skin in order to communicate vulnerability, when in fact the agent is fully armed even when unclothed. The text manipulates gendered notions of heroism through this tension between the agent's innocent appearance and the powerful technology hiding beneath her skin.

Returning to the rhetoric of the new heroism manifesto, the "ordinary people" who are offered the chance to "glow in the cosmos of human achievement" (Egan, 2012, pp. 21–22) are women, adding a gendered dimension to the critiques of self-involvement and superficial interests. The goal of the new heroism to merge and become content with being one of hundreds removes individual power from these women by marking them as a collective, as mass-produced weapons wielded by those in charge. Directly, these superior powers are the individuals that

the agents take orders from and report to, but more largely, they are the patriarchal and capitalist social systems which see the female body as a marketable product. In this sense, the cyborg depicted in "Black Box" becomes a method to make the female body fit for the task at hand. This reveals some dystopian consequences to Haraway's (1990) vision of the cyborg, seeming to reinforce the "dualisms . . . persistent in Western tradition" (p. 175) which are "systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women" (p. 181), rather than offering a way out of them as Haraway's manifesto hopes. By using the cyborg to create a collective heroism, Egan inverts the standard notion of heroism as one exceptional individual, most traditionally an individual male character—stemming from masculine archetypes such as Campbell's (1949) hero's journey. Instead, the cyborg is tied to the collective female heroism endorsed by "Black Box"'s new heroism manifesto, amplifying the dualism of gender by separating these heroes on the basis of gender and not allowing these women the individual glory granted to the male hero.

"Black Box" depicts scenes of sexual interaction between the agent and her target as a necessary component of her cover as a beauty. These moments in the text are uncomfortable to read, written from the inner perspective of the agent who focuses on her duty to perform regardless of her personal comfort or desires. The instructional nature of the text allows her to reveal this discomfort within her guidance for future agents, rather than presenting it as the primary focus of her description. For example, the agent suggests that "throwing back your head and closing your eyes allows you to give the appearance of sexual readiness while concealing revulsion" (Egan, 2012, p. 5), presenting concealing revulsion as of secondary importance to maintaining her cover. The second person narration functions both as an instruction for future agents and as a distancing technique for the agent experiencing the event, who narrates her own experience as if she were describing another woman's body. This distancing continues and is epitomised by the "Dissociation Technique" used by the agent to vacate her body in these moments:

> Begin the Dissociation Technique only when physical violation is imminent.
> Close your eyes and slowly count backward from ten.
> With each number, imagine yourself rising out of your body and moving one step farther away from it
> By eight, you should be hovering just outside your skin
> By five, you should be floating a foot or two above your body, feeling only vague anxiety over what is about to happen
> By three, you should feel fully detached from your physical self
> By two, your body should be able to act and react without your participation

> By one, your mind should drift so free that you lose track of what is happening below. . .
> Your mind will rejoin your body when it is safe to do so. (Egan, 2012, pp. 6–7)

Trauma has been theorised by some as an unspeakable memory or a black hole, as the event is too painful and overwhelming to address directly (Caruth, 1996; Pitman & Orr, 1990). This concept aligns well with the "Dissociation Technique" in "Black Box," where the individual, separated from her physical experience, leaves a blank space in her mental recollection of the moment rather than the physical memory. This progressive separation from her physical body allows the agent to endure the assault without processing her bodily experience. This is the only agency she has; the only protest available against this violation is to not acknowledge the exact details of the encounter or her physical participation in it.

Sherman (1997) notes that when female characters are chosen by players, "the notion of 'using' her may also have sexual connotations" (p. 254). Several scholars have noted this problematic idea of male players "using" female characters. Kennedy's (2002) analysis of Lara Croft concludes that "the pleasures of playing as Lara are more concerned with mastery and control of a body coded as female within a safe and unthreatening context" ("But Playing as Lara…," para. 4). Gestos et al.'s (2018) study on video games and female wellbeing even suggests that male players can become "more tolerant of abuse toward women, rape myth acceptance, and sexist attitudes toward women in a real-life setting" (p. 539) after playing games with sexually objectified female characters. This domination of a female body becomes real within the world of "Black Box," as the agent is sexually used to further her political task. Yet, obscuring these details from her own memory and from the recounting of the events means that the agent does not allow herself to be "used" in this sense by the reader—including both the Twitter reader and anyone within the text who will read her missions log. While in this act of dissociation the agent vacates ownership of her own body and turns it over as a political tool, she also rejects any emotional consequences and does not cognitively absorb this interaction or add it to her personal and professional history.

"Black Box" enables some manipulation of the gendered power dynamics and stereotypes that the agent's cover identity relies upon. Sherman's (1997) study states that, in male-centred games with limited female characters, female players are able to "revision the text to make the female central and powerful, akin to what Alicia Ostriker calls 'revisionist mythmaking,' whereby women appropriate a 'tale…for altered ends'" (p. 256). The hero in "Black Box" can be viewed as both a character within the text and as the real player of the game, providing guidance for future players. These manipulations allow the agents to escape the notion that heroines only play a supporting role in a hero's story. The

agents subvert stereotypical expectations of women and heroes by utilising their sexual appeal to divert attention from their true intentions and abilities, relying on their targets to disregard them on the basis of appearance. Further, the nature of the text as a source of advice for other agents amplifies their subterfuge by acting as a communal resource shared by the women, offering protection strategies such as the Dissociation Technique to manage the sexual trauma attached to the role. The agents use these tools to avoid entirely losing themselves within their role and becoming only a vessel for male action and desire. The feminist cyborg story thus acts as a position of digital heroism able to reorientate the focus of the story and recentre women through a manipulation of patriarchal dualisms.

Digital Death in "Black Box"

The text's promise of a collective heroism extends beyond the agent's active service, offering a new understanding of death and the afterlife. Death, the only guarantee in human life, is rewritten, and is no longer the end of all existence, as the collected data remains:

> Remember that, should you die, your Field Instructions will provide a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow. Remember that, should you die, you will have triumphed merely by delivering your physical person into our hands. (Egan, 2012, p. 48)

Death becomes a success story, reminding the agent that her body and consciousness are secondary to the data she must collect on her mission. The human body, the beauty, is merely attractive disposable packaging. Again, individuality is removed as the agents' unique lives, experiences, and bodies are erased and become collective, homogenous data points. Bodies are literally disposable—to be delivered into the hands of superiors and torn apart in order to salvage the wires and chips hidden within flesh. In this case, the cyborg enables a performance of digital heroism that exceeds mortality, suggesting a way out of the ultimate dualism of life versus death.

Even beyond death, this digitisation extends to a new kind of afterlife. Egan (2012) writes:

> Some citizen agents have chosen not to return.
> They have left their bodies behind, and now they shimmer sublimely in the heavens.
> In the new heroism, the goal is to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and loves, in favor of the dazzling collective.
> You may picture the pulsing stars as the heroic spirits of former agent beauties.
> You may imagine Heaven as a vast screen crowded with their dots of light. (p. 50)

This statement describes the ultimate transition from human flesh to disembodied cognition made possible through the agents' unique physicality. It completely disrupts the typical human chronology, as living forever as a technological signifier provides eternal permanence in a way the human body cannot sustain. The agents are consoled by their digital legacy, encouraged to find peace in this digital cosmos to which they will add a dot of light. This explains the appeal of an afterlife as a blinking light on a screen—it is a symbol of sacrifice representing the abstraction of identity from bodily form and the eternal preservation of data.

Again, echoing video game language and norms, each dot of light represents a completed mission saved permanently on a digital server. Just as in video games where players can often return to levels after accomplishing the central mission or view their greatest achievements in the game, once the agent has completed her mission, her heroic journey is saved for future players to learn from. Once more, this emphasises the collective nature of this heroism, with each mission informing the next through the agents leaving behind their experiences as an example for others. This compounds the idea of the agents as a collective, as their memorial is not a gravestone engraved with familial connections or their time spent on earth, but a record of their successes and failures on their mission, a journey and goal shared by all agents. The technology removes personal histories from the agents and becomes the dominant force defining the human body it resides within. This is further emphasised in this depiction of death as a dot of light on a screen, each one identical to the other. The computer screen then becomes a digital graveyard filled with these identical digital gravestones, upholding a technological legacy that overrides and erases the individual personal histories of the agents, defining their lives only in relation to their missions as digital heroes.

Conclusion

Reading "Black Box" with reference to video games provides insight into the contribution of different digital media to electronic fiction and the new and creative ways social media can be used to create narratives and play. The formal aspects of the platform aid in extending this notion of interactivity to a text-based, closed narrative such as "Black Box," as readers are given opportunities to play and interact with the text. Further, the emotional investment within technology in the text amplifies these ideas of interactivity. From the cyborg body of its protagonist to the virtual body of the text itself, "Black Box" asks how technology might alter our material experiences. The formal innovation occurring within Twitter fiction is akin to the way gaming narratives are able to facilitate emotional interactions with technology itself, technologising the competitive strategies of analogue games and the narrative arcs of paper-and-pencil games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Ostenson, 2013, p. 72). In a similar move, Twitter fiction takes the

narrative heart of a paper novel and translates it into the social media landscape. This signals the increasing experimentation we might see within electronic fiction, as readers and authors continue to expect these opportunities for narratives to appear in digital landscapes.

These expectations for digital narrative extend beyond fiction. "Black Box"'s representation of a digital graveyard is far from fantasy: Companies have already begun to capitalise on the desire for a virtual afterlife by creating specific websites for that purpose. Sites such as SafeBeyond (safebeyond.com) allow users to "secure [their] legacy forever" and "remain connected with [their] loved ones and be part of their lives for years to come" by uploading messages for loved ones to receive on specific dates or milestones, thus remaining part of major life events. Furthermore, social media websites are becoming incidental digital graveyards by hosting data from a user's page long after that person's death. In fact, in 2019, Twitter was forced to back-pedal on a plan to cancel all inactive accounts because of backlash they received from users who find connection and comfort in being able to view accounts of deceased users (Kasket, 2020). Though not created for this purpose, the popularity of social media websites has led many to document life's milestones online, essentially leaving behind a pre-curated obituary after their death. This adaption of social media to preserve digital narratives morphs Twitter from a site of live engagement to one of preservation and memorial, changing the profile's purpose after the death of the user. This idea of the social media memorial enables users to immortalise their lived experiences by choosing what to digitally publish and preserve.

Twitter is thus a uniquely appropriate platform for "Black Box" as the unretractable nature of online content guarantees digital immortality in the same manner promised within the text itself—living on forever as a collection of digital data points. Online archives, retweets, and screenshots promise the same kind of preservation. The fragmented publication style and ability to explore digital pathways mean that the text itself becomes part of a larger story, merging with other narratives and losing its own material borders, not existing as a traditional, tangible paper book. In this sense, "Black Box" loses its individual structure as a unified piece of fiction and becomes part of the dazzling digital collective.

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