

_intro

**connecting,
reconnecting,
disconnecting**

As the world attempted to recover from a global pandemic, issues of disconnection and reconnection were at the forefront of many people's minds. The horrors (and joys) of being disconnected from the wider world, and the anticipation (or anxiety) around reconnecting with family, loved ones and society at large therefore formed the inspiration for the curatorial theme for ICIDS 2021 art exhibition. These concepts relate to interactive narratives not only in terms of theme, but also methodologies, structures and modalities. This exhibition encouraged artists to explore Reconnection and/or Disconnection across disciplines, languages, cultures, technologies, and histories.

The works in this exhibition fell into several broad categories within the theme. Connection with the self, connection with others and connection with places arose repeatedly, while both the dangers and benefits of disconnection were explored in a variety of the works and their related chapters. Finally, a reconnection with the past was key in several of the works, but none so literally as the piece

that opens this collection: Richard Holeton's *Figurski at Findhorn on Acid*.

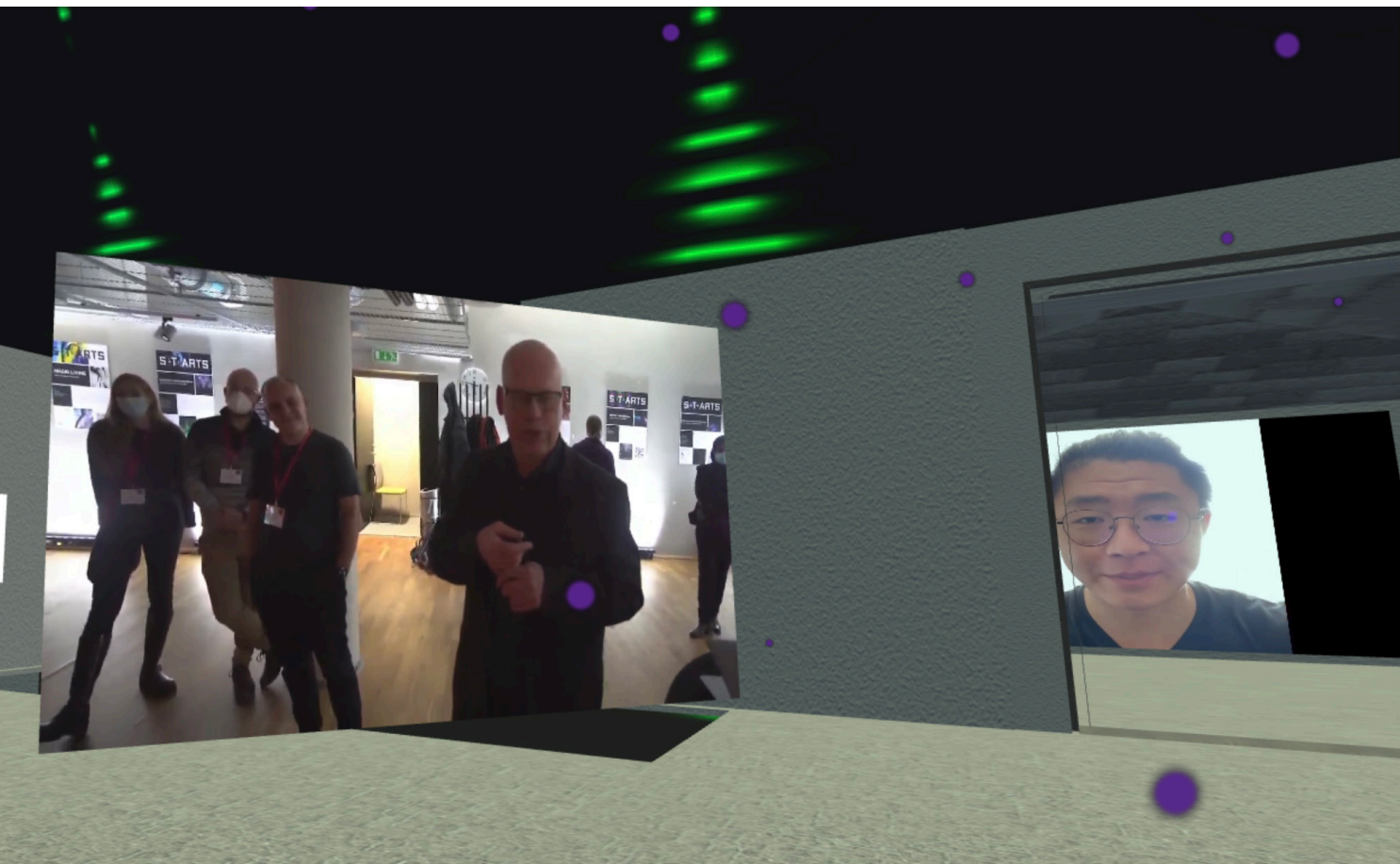
Exemplifying so much of what made the 2021 ICIDS Exhibition fascinating—traditional modes and methods presented side by side with the latest forms and technologies, *Figurski* was first conceived, written and published in the early days of interactive digital storytelling. This seminal hypertext narrative suffered a literal disconnection in the mid 2000s when the Eastgate Systems software it ran on became obsolete, only to be reconnected with its readers twenty years later, thanks to the Electronic Literature Lab's restoration work. This new edition connects readers "across time instantaneously and from every screen in *Figurski*, simply by toggling back and forth between the Contemporary Edition and the Classic Edition". In doing so, it connects not only the past with the present, but also the scholarly with the readerly via the two versions of the text.

Serge Bucharidon's *A Web Odyssey*, similarly connects past and present. As its name might suggest, this work takes its

inspiration from Greek myth, reimagining Ulysses' voyage as a journey across the internet. As Bouchardon observes: "like Ulysses, the user needs to have a good understanding of the (connected) environment to interact effectively and complete their journey". Ithaca becomes the e-thaca network, the Cyclops that must be blinded is the roving eye of the web cam, and the alluring apathy of the lotus-flowers is instead induced by endlessly scrolling through social media feeds. Here, it is disconnection which saves the day.

The positive possibilities of disconnection are also explored in Andrew Phelps and Doris Rusch's Twine narrative, *The Witch's Way*. It is only when protagonist Lou is disconnected from her everyday life and experiences that she is able to reconnect with herself. The structure and design of the narrative draws on methods from existential psychology, which "rejects the notion of 'mental illness' and focuses instead on creating a deep connection with the true self". The authors explain this methodology in detail and their desire to drive self-reflection in readers following Lou's journey.





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Artist Julián Palacios Gechtman describes his work *Promesa* as “a contemplative experience where you’ll wander through the dreams, memories and fantasies emerging from a dialogue between my grandfather and me”. Here the familial connections are made explicit, but the links and contexts of the explorable videogame spaces are more ambiguous, allowing the reader-player to make their own connections as well as piecing together those that are presented. As in *The Witch’s Way* reflection is an important part of the narrative, but in *Promesa* it is the experience, rather than the self, which is reflected upon.

Volker Kuchelmeister, Gail Kenning and Jill Bennet of the felt Experience and Empathy Lab also ask users to connect with an elder in *The Visit*. Here, though, it is for the purpose of ‘cultivating empathy through VR engagements with lived experience’ of dementia. Through confronting the participant (quite literally) with Viv, a virtual character who reacts to their presence and shares her experiences, a new understanding of dementia and those living with it is developed.

LaughLand (2019) by Keren Kuenberg

makes similar use of genuine locations and experiences seen in *The Visit*, but in this piece the soundscapes and interactive digital interface connect us across time and space to a now demolished shop, allowing viewers to explore a place that no longer exists and creating a vibrant ‘living archive’.

Secrets of Soil by Henry Driver shares this preoccupation with environment, albeit with a very different motivation – Driver is from a farming family and therefore invested in the properties of soil for a variety of reasons including a desire to obtain carbon neutral status. *Story of Soil* is a narrative which presents a “a whole universe of interconnected life” in glowing colours and intricate structures, encouraging us all to think of our connection to the earth, the soil, and the life that goes on beneath our feet.

Hidden lives are also a concern in *Office for Language Under Capitalism* by Kathy Wu—“a meditation on invisible work which we are disconnected from”. It parodies and critiques the structures of automated voice-controlled phone systems via a non-linear web-based mobile phone audio poem, as well as exposing the invisible labour associated with such systems.

In Austin Wolfe's *Aonar*, it is the player who is rendered invisible. *Aonar* uses Scottish mythology to tell a VR story of isolation and longing. Like *The Visit*, the affordances of virtual reality are used to build empathy between the player and the protagonist. The desire to connect with the lighthouse keeper is initially thwarted, forcing the player to experience the character's loneliness themselves, before finally being permitted to join him in his contemplation.

Drop/let's/fail to connect by Laureline Chiappello and Florian Glesser takes this use of mechanics to elicit player emotion a little further, using a method which Ian Bogost calls procedural rhetoric (advancing an argument through computational systems). Seemingly a conventional game, the player controls two raindrops, guiding them around obstacles. However, to advance the narrative they must fail. It's only through crashing into scenery that the raindrops are able to experience the world and eventually connect with one another. "The title may be first read as a failure: "Droplets, fail[ing] to connect", but actually, it is a happy injunction to fail: "drop, let's fail [in order] to connect!" the authors explain.

Tianbai Jia's *Her Palace* uses VR to present the viewer with a series of memory episodes from the main character's life. These "share a common character and a cohesive visual style, but the relationship across the episodes is intentionally ambiguous, fragmented, and disconnected". As in *Aonar*, the use of VR as a narrative medium in turn draws in and pushes away the viewer, complicating their relationship with the protagonist and the content they are viewing.

Told through fragments of a different kind, the only mobile app in the exhibition (although Kathy Wu's work is accessed via a phone, it isn't an app as such), *UnearthU* by Kara Stone is a mock wellness app. Taking the idea of being connected to the earth and technology and contorting it into a gradually realized horror, *UnearthU* demonstrates the exploitative, extractive nature of many big tech companies; even those that purport to be doing good. In order to avoid contributing to wasteful technological practices, Stone explains that *UnearthU* is made entirely of "existing materials, putting them together and 'composting' them into a converted form".



Like *Figurski at Findhorn on Acid*, it reuses older content to create something new. And so we come full circle, with the works reconnecting and connecting with one another, as well as with their reader-players and the wider world.

We were not the only ones to connect with these art works. Our judging panel kindly reviewed all submitted art works and selected those which they felt best represented the theme. The judging team was:

- Ryan Bown, Associate Professor of Entertainment Arts Engineering, University of Utah
- Dr Joshua Fisher, Assistant Professor of Immersive Media, Columbia College Chicago
- Dr Néill O'Dwyer, Senior Research Fellow in Computer Science, Trinity College Dublin
- Taavet Jansen, Artist and Researcher, Estonian Academy of Arts
- Dr Jung In Jung, Research Fellow in Interactive Engagement, University of Dundee
- Brian Salisbury, Associate Professor of

Entertainment Arts Engineering, University of Utah

- Dr Maria Cecilia Reyes, Writer and Researcher-in-Residence, Akademie Schloss Solitude
- Dr Lyle Skains, Writer and Principal Academic in Health and Science Communication, Bournemouth University
- Prof. Dr. Ido Iurgel, Professor of Media Informatics, Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences
- Dr Lissa Holloway-Attaway, Associate Professor of Media Arts, Aesthetics and Narration, University of Skövde

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Lynda Clark
ICIDS Art Book 2021 Editor

Creative Chair & Book Editor

Lynda Clark. Lecturer in Creative Writing for Interdisciplinary Futures, University of Edinburgh (Scotland). A novelist and creator of interactive narratives, she holds a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing from Nottingham Trent University. Her research interests include the development of writing processes for emerging tools and technologies, the relationship between writers and technology, Victorian tech and speculative fiction. Her debut short story collection, *Dreaming in Quantum*, explores many of these ideas through fiction.

Creative Chair & Exhibition Curator

Raivo Kelomees. PhD (art history), is an artist, critic and new media researcher. He studied psychology, art history and design in Tartu University and the Academy of Arts in Tallinn. He is senior researcher at the Fine Arts Faculty at the Estonian Academy of Arts and professor at the Pallas University of Applied Sciences. Kelomees is author of *Surrealism* (Kunst Publishers, 1993) and article collections *Screen as a Membrane* (Tartu Art College proceedings, 2007) and *Social Games in Art Space* (EAA, 2013). His doctoral thesis is *Postmateriality in Art. Indeterministic Art Practices and Non-Material Art* (Dissertationes Academiae Artium Estoniae 3, 2009). Together with Chris Hales he edited the collection of articles *Constructing Narrative in Interactive Documentaries* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).