NO READER LEFT BEHIND
The First Person Shooter Punk Manifesto

"The bastard form of mass culture is humiliated repetition… always new books, new programs, new items, but always the same meaning." - Roland Barthes.

Dear reader,

I ask you, out of all the books, pages and paragraphs you've read throughout the years, how many would you care to read again? Great works have the ability to be experienced countlessly with each time providing a new meaning, and while not all books are meant to become great works of art, a book only worth reading once is a book not worth reading at all, and a book not worth reading is a book not worth writing. You reader have been misled, tricked, fooled, abused, bamboozled, robbed, and for too long forced fed with mass-produced quantities of disposable piles of words. It wasn't that long ago that Roland Barthes shook the literary world with his brilliant essay *The Death of the Author*, but it seems that his call to action for authors to emancipate the reader has fallen on deaf ears. Regardless of style, school, or genre, most authors still infantilize the reader, effectively abiding to a *No Reader Left Behind* policy.

This fear from authors of being too avant-garde or too demanding on readers has brought down the level of narratives to the lowest common denominator, to guarantee that all readers reach the ending without too much, if anything, being asked of them. Not all books are born equal, neither are readers, but inequality can be both unfair and yet a powerful motivator. It stinks to be at the bottom of a pyramid, but it's actually not all that fun to be at the top either. What's enjoyable is to overcome, to start at the bottom and to reach the top all through one's agency, that is without being the recipient of help however well-intended. If there's a page for writers to take from the success of video games, it is that by rewarding efforts and the development of skills, game designers advocate for players to try and fail as many times as it takes to succeed.

Writers should not be parents holding readers hands. Authors should think of readers the same way game designers think of players: as people who are not afraid of failure but who enjoy and welcome measuring themselves against adversity. Authors should think of readers the same way Nietzsche's

Zarathustra thought of his students: not as children to be led along, but as challengers willing to overcome themselves. Authors should also think about getting out of the way of their own narratives and let readers make their own damn way to the top. There are five game mechanics that authors should think of using to emancipate the reader, and this new hybrid, this convergence between video gaming and literature, I name it the First Person Shooter Punk:

1. The narrator should not be omniscient. Whether using the first or third perspective, omniscience is equivalent to playing a game and being invincible: there is no fun nor challenge in knowing everything. Even in the case of high fantasy the author will still want for the reader to be immersed in a fictional world with believable characters whose intentions, desires, feelings and actions, may or may not be known to the narrator. A story where one knows everything there is to know prevents the possibility of discovery, it asks nothing of the reader, and leaves no opportunity to find nor to judge anything based on the reader's own agency. Omniscience leaves no room for reader's input, and shapes the fiction into a box that always returns the same output. An author should leave the fiction world open to the reader's input, so that each reader, or better yet, each reading yields a different meaning.

2. Chapters should be designed like game levels. The beginning chapters should allow the reader to acquaint his/herself with the fiction world, but gradually chapters like game levels, should ask of the reader to overcome increasingly difficult obstacles. By obstacles is not meant the complexity of the plot, events, characters nor any other specific element of the narrative. Each chapter should work as the stage for a theme or for a driving force to play out by giving the reader the opportunity to resolve that specific aspect of the fiction. In Joseph Campbell's monomyth, the hero sets him/herself on a journey from the known to the unknown, to then come back full circle to the known with a greater understanding. Similarly, each chapter should challenge the reader through a strategic immersion into the theme, and should allow the reader to come full circle with an understanding of the theme's role within the greater scope of the story. Not unlike a finger to a hand, each chapter works as an independent component also part of a whole greater that the sum of its parts. As such, the story is no longer a linear narrative, but a non-linear sequence of narrative loops.

3. The reader should be provided status updates. This status update should not be related to the logic of the page, that other legacy of the *No Reader Left Behind* policy. To keep the reader immersed in the narrative, all indications on how close to the end, or how far into the story the reader is, should be avoided. Instead, similar to the use of status bars in first-person shooters, status updates should be used to immerse the reader in the present moment,

weaving strategic immersion into the narrative. Be it time, place, location or, depending on the genre, the number of suspects for a murder trial, the Grade Point Average for a coming of age story, Dow Jones, S&P 500 and Nasdaq indexes for a financial conspiracy, the number of days in love for a romance novel, etc, regular status updates challenge the reader to question, analyze or anticipate possible events based on the changes and variations of statuses within the narrative. To emancipate the reader is to enable him/her to give meaning to the text, and status updates are the tool enabling the reader to do so.

4. The annotations should become a manual. The use of a manual when playing a video game, and similarly of the pausing functionality to access menus and settings, break the gameplay in the same way that David Foster Wallace's expansive and sometimes pages long endnotes broke the linearity of *Infinite Jest*. Indeed, infinity is the aim here, and is realized by creating immersions, strategic or narrative, within the greater immersion of the novel. If footnotes and endnotes were the pit stops on the roadside of a linear narrative, forks in the road, short-cuts, or even impasses should replace them. The manual should be thought as a list of alternate hence altering paths. In other words, notes should become hypertexts. By letting the reader decide at his/her discretion if, when, and how to use the manual provided, the number of possible readings becomes infinite. In the words of Jorge Luis Borges, arguably the father of the hypertext novel: "In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others… He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves proliferate and fork."(1)

5. The novel should become a simulation. While fiction novels have mostly languished within the boundaries of 20th century realism and objective third-person representations, the constant innovations made in video gaming have paved the way for virtual worlds providing interactive and highly immersive simulations at times more stimulating than reality itself. Authors must come to term with one of the major consequences of the Digital Revolution: representation is no longer possible. According to cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, there are four orders of the image: first is the representation of the real, second is the denaturation of the real, third is the masking of the absence of the real, and fourth is the simulation with no relation to reality, namely hyperreality. In the digital age, we can no longer make representations of the world we live in because representation now precedes reality, and as such is no longer a representation but a model. Hence the end of the principle of reality, and the birth of the hyperreal, reality as nothing more than the simulation of a model. The fiction novel must evolve into a simulation, for a failure to do so will result in its virtual death.

Gareth K. Mensah.

Work Cited:

1. The Garden of Forking Paths, short story by Jorge Luis Borges, 1941. http://web.archive.org/web/20060528160418/http://courses.essex.ac.uk/lt/lt204/forking_paths.htm