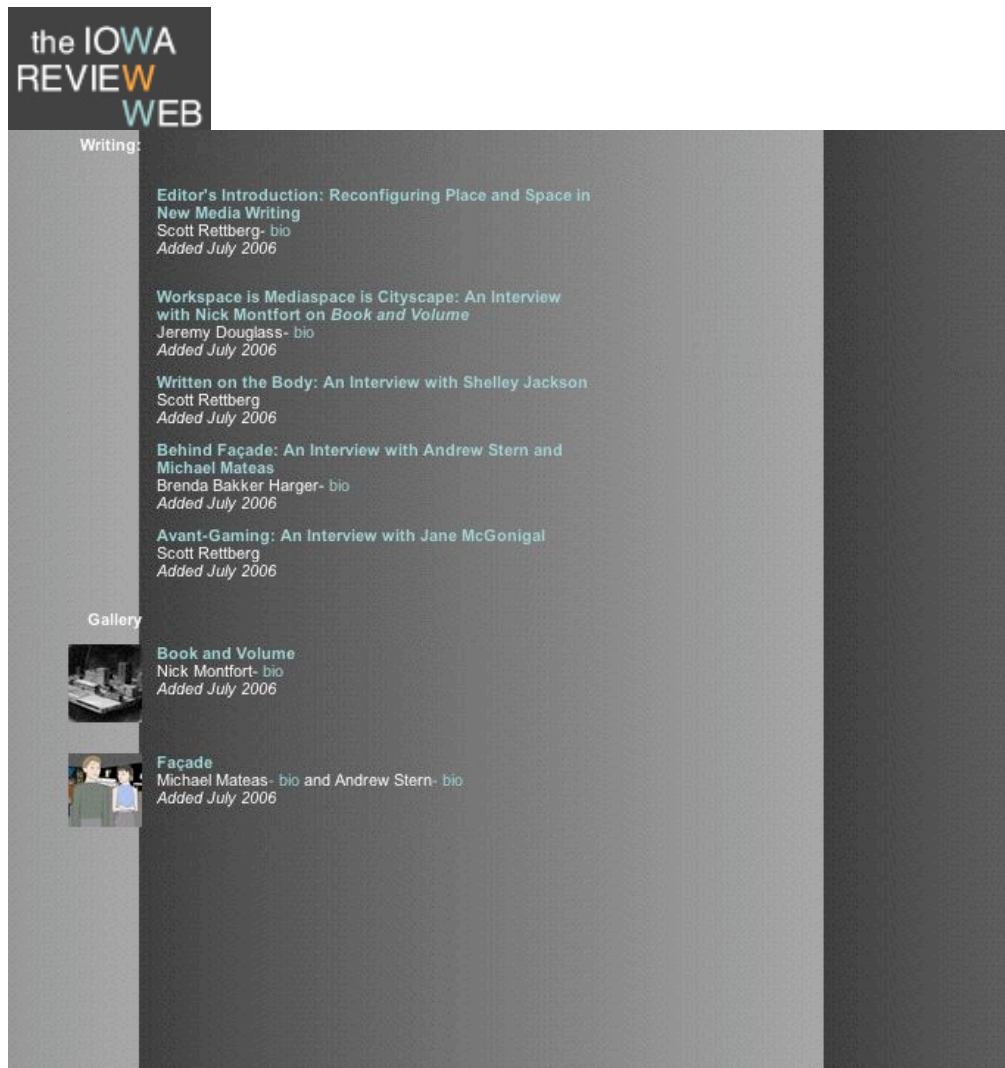Special Issue of The Iowa Review Web on "Place and Space in New Media Writing." I guest-edited the issue in July 2006. Please find attached the Editor's Introduction, as well as the two interviews I conducted with Shelley Jackson and Jane McGonigal. URL:
www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/mainpages/new/july06/july06_txt.html

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REVIEW
WEB

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Editor's Introduction: Reconfiguring Place and Space in New Media Writing

Jay David Bolter titled his influential study of the history of writing, the computer, and hypertext *Writing Space* [1991] in part because he believed that computers present us with a fundamental shift in the nature of the conceptual and material space of writing. Bolter wrote that while the writing space of medieval handwriting and modern printing was the printed page, the computer's writing space is "animated, visually complex, and to a surprising extent malleable" and that electronic writing offers a new conceptual space "characterized by fluidity and an interactive relationship between writer and reader" (11). It is perhaps emblematic of the progression of the field of new media writing that among Bolter's more recent projects is *Four Angry Men*, [2003] a "single-narrative, multiple point-of-view augmented reality experience," in which the user sits at a table in a physical space while experiencing an abridged version of *Twelve Angry Men* from the point of view of one of four jurors. The other characters appear as texture-mapped video in the other three chairs at the table. The multimedia writing space has extended from the computer back into the physical world.

From the earliest hypertext fictions written in Storyspace and the interactive fictions of the Infocom era, space and place have had distinctly different and in many ways more prominent roles than setting typically plays in the structure of print narratives. From the spelunking of *Adventure* and the *Zork* series onwards, interactive fictions are always in a fundamental sense about the description of imaginary spaces, and the readers' role is to navigate from one space to the next, solving riddles as they proceed. Hypertexts written in Storyspace software, such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* [1995], used that program's capacity to visually represent hypertext nodes as configurations of boxes connected by links to present visual maps of writing spaces. *Patchwork Girl* and Jackson's webwork *My Body & -- a Wunderkammer* [1997] both also integrate woodcut imagemaps of the protagonists' bodies, which the reader can click through to stories describing or related to each organ or appendage.

In most hypertext fiction, the role of chronology in structuring the narrative is greatly diminished in comparison to print fiction conventions. In the absence of chronology, the authors of fragmented multilinear narratives need to offer their readers other tools for navigating the text. In an environment described as *cyberspace*, developed with *home* pages on web *sites*, geographical metaphors make almost intuitive sense. Any textual link is of course itself a means of navigation, but authors of web hypertext typically offer readers other orienting strategies as well. In addition to a calendar and character-based means of navigation, Bobby Rabyd a.k.a. Robert Arellano's network novel *Sunshine 69* [1996] also provides a map of the San Francisco Bay area, enabling the reader to organize their reading geographically. The reader traverses Matthew Miller's "Trip"

[1996] by first choosing a state in the US and then by choosing specific interstates to change course. The collaborative hypertext novel *The Unknown* [1999] likewise used geography as an organizational strategy, and the road trip as a trope. Stuart Moulthrop's *Reagan Library* [1999] can be navigated both by textual links and by moving through a three-dimensional Myst-like Quicktime VR world. In Moulthrop's most recent work *Pax* [2003], the user clicks on bodies rising and falling through space, momentarily visiting each avatar's consciousness in the process of assembling a patchworked story of American consciousness during the war on (or in) terror. The collective narrative project *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood* includes hundreds of individual contributions of short fiction and nonfiction set in specific locations all over New York City. The reader can navigate to stories by selecting a New York neighborhood or by zooming in on a satellite map of Manhattan to the specific street address where the story takes place.

Since the 1980s, there have been a number of installation-based new media writing projects, including Jeffrey Shaw's *Legible City* [1989], which had the user navigating a labyrinthine city of words by riding a stationary bicycle. Installation-based forms of new media writing typically utilize the user's body as an instrument in revealing, uncovering, arranging, or modifying the text. In Camille Utterback & Romy Achituv's *Text Rain* [1999], users catch and play with letters as they fall like rain on the users' mirror images in the projection in front of them. In Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al.'s *Talking Cure* [2002], the user's face or body is projected as a text field that reveals one layer of a three-layer text centered on Anna O, Joseph Breur's patient that gave him and Freud the idea of the talking cure. Another layer of the text is created by the user's voice translated by a text-to-speech engine. Recently, Robert Coover has led a series of CAVE writing workshops at Brown University, which have produced a number of literary pieces designed for that fully immersive three-dimensional environment, including Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al.'s *Screen* [2002-2005] and William Gillespie and David Dao's *Word Museum* [2005]. CAVE installations give the user the sensation of being inside a computer-generated environment. Words and graphics become material forms that can peel off the wall and fly at your head, or can be approached from many angles like a sculpture in a museum.

While installations and VR environments have increasingly liberated the user's body from the seated-in-front-of-screen-at-keyboard position and brought the body inside the ontological space of the work itself, mobile computing and communication technologies are increasingly powerful and pervasive. Writers, artists, performers, and "puppet-masters" are employing network writing strategies to deploy a variety of projects that extend from the network into the real world. Projects such as Teri Rueb's *Itinerant* [2005] make use of mobile and locational technologies including GPS and RFID to create narrative experiences affected by the user's movement through the physical world. In the case of *Itinerant*, as users walked through Boston Commons

and surrounding neighborhoods they experienced an interactive sound work that re-framed Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Projects such as *Yellow Arrow* [2004-Present] pair coded stickers with text messaging, enabling users to write and read brief personal narratives about locations tagged in the physical world. *Implementation* [2004] is a fragmentary novel published on stickers that was deployed and photographed by participant readers around the world. *Surrender Control* [2001] utilized SMS as a performance medium, sending its users a series of directions as text messages, ordering them to perform a variety of absurdist actions during the course of their everyday lives. Similarly, the phenonmenon of flash mobs makes use of text messaging to assemble groups of people for alternately absurdist and political activities. Extensible web technologies such as Google Maps paired with GPS coordinates also offer narrative possibilities, as evidenced by projects such as the "Memory Maps" group on Flickr, whose users have created personal narratives of places through coordinate-tagged photographs accessed through interactive maps.

This installment of the *Iowa Review Web* explores the function of place and space in recent new media writing. Each of the four interviews concern works that in some way attempt to reconfigure our understanding of the relationship between space and storytelling. Each of the primary works discussed in these interviews also pushes space in another sense, in that each attempts to explore a new "possibility space" on the boundary between different forms and fields of multimedia experience: between story and game, between game and drama, between literature and conceptual art, between game and performance.

Nick Montfort and Jeremy Douglass discuss Montfort's new interactive fiction *Book and Volume* [2006], a work that casts the player character as a kind of cross betweeen a flâneur and Pavlovian functionary, a computer tech completing the quotidian tasks of working life in the grid city of nTopia. The work explores the nature of the phenomenological experience of life in the city, among other aspects how the idle chatter and white noise of city life affect our experience of the polis as place. Montfort says "These things are sort of irrelevant to you as a human being in an ontological world, but nevertheless are going on all around you in the city, and reminding you of the existence of city life. So, in addition to there being a literary purpose for wanting these amusing texts to appear once in a while, there is also a connection to the atmosphere and experience of a city."

Andrew Stern and Michael Mateas discuss with Brenda Harger the process of writing and programming their groundbreaking interactive drama *Façade*. The 2006 Slamdance Guerilla Gamemaker Award-winner, *Façade* [2005] is a game in the form of an interactive one-act play. The player character, an avatar in a partially three-dimensional environment, arrives one night at

the apartment of two old college friends, now married, in the midst of a fairly tense argument. You as the player become embroiled in their argument, cast into the role of referee. Insofar as there is a goal in *Façade*, it is to moderate a therapy game and manage the intractable marital discord of your hosts, as you navigate the anxious and awkward spaces of both Grace and Trip's small urban apartment and the crumbling edifice of their relationship. Mateas highlights *Façade*'s inversion of the commercial gaming conventions of vast virtual environments that players wander having shallow interactions with "objects and non-player characters--dodging, jumping, running, shooting, etc." to a more intimate environment that fosters "deep interaction."

Shelley Jackson offers a discussion of her recent work in print, electronic, and epidermal media. Jackson is the author of the print fiction collection *The Melancholy of Anatomy* [2002] and the forthcoming novel *Half Life*, electronic works including the canonical hypertext fiction *Patchwork Girl* and the webwork *The Doll Games*[2002], and most recently the story "Skin," [2004-Present] which is being published on the skin of 2,095 volunteers in the form of single word tattoos. The interview focuses in particular on the various ways that Jackson has thematized the intimately alien space of the human body. Jackson writes "I am feeling my way through some sort of impossible topological figure here, probably a Klein bottle, to explain the outside-inness of my sense of self, but there are other ways to put it. Let's see if this is simpler: there are some parts of me that are permanently unknowable, and one of those things is the very basis of knowing: the body."

Jane McGonigal is a designer and practictioner of alternate reality games. McGonigal provides a discussion of massively collaborative play and performance in everyday spaces. Alternate reality games such as *I Love Bees*[2004] and the *Go Game* are cross-media experiences, typically played both via the web and other communication technologies and in physical real-world environments. Players perform the games based on the clues and prompts of "puppet-masters." In navigating the path of challenges laid by the puppetmasters, players uncover and in a sense help to author a controlling narrative, while simultaneously developing the emergent narrative of their own experience of the game. McGonigal writes that "Stories linger in the places after we experience them. And the stories we tell about our personal experiences in a place help us own that space, to feel comfortable there, to make others comfortable there, to feel alive there. I believe the job of the designers of reality-based games like big urban games and alternate reality games is to figure out: What kind of story would players want to be able to tell about this space?"

Monfort's *Book and Volume* and Mateas and Stern's *Façade* are both featured works in this installment of the *Iowa Review Web* and are available for your download, play, and interaction. I hope that these new works and interviews will give you a window on four very different ideas of

the function of place and space in new media writing and will perhaps inspire some other writers to take advantage of some of the vast potentialities of creating new writing spaces at the intersection of virtual environments and real-world geography.

Works and Projects Discussed

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Rueb, Teri. *Itinerant.* 2005.

Shaw, Jeffery. *The Legible City.* 1989.

Utterback, Camille, and Romy Achituv. *Text Rain.* 1999.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, Clilly Castigilia, Camille Utterback, and Nathan Wardrip-Fruin. *Talking Cure.* 2002.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, Josh Carroll, Robert Coover, Shawn Greenlee, and Andrew McClain. *Screen*. 2002-2005.

Shelley Jackson is the author of the short story collection The Melancholy of Anatomy, the hypertext classic PATCHWORK GIRL, several children's books, and "Skin," a story published in tattoos on the skin of 2095 volunteers. Her first novel *Half Life* is forthcoming from HarperCollins. She lives in Brooklyn, NY and teaches at the New School.
Her website: <http://ww.ineradicablestain.com>.

Scott Rettberg: Although you've written literary work and created art in many different platforms, ranging from drawings to Storyspace hypertext to webworks and print fiction, certain themes and obsessions recur across your body of work. In many of your projects there seems to be a fascination with the space of the body, and in particular with the relationship of the body to consciousness. As I think about *Patchwork Girl*, "My Body – a Wunderkammer," and your collection *The Melancholy of Anatomy* in particular, I see a consistent fascination with the body as other, as if each organ, fluid, and membrane in our bodies have not only their own functions but their own agendas or even consciousness as well. Could you describe the root of your fascination with bodies and their constituent parts? As you think about your work over the last fifteen years or so, do you see a kind of evolution in your view of the body?

Shelley Jackson: I continue to be amazed that I exist. Or that I seem to; the question is not settled to my satisfaction. It seems highly unlikely that what asks the question is made of matter, grey or not. The very fact our matter thinks makes its credentials as matter suspect. Maybe, like Samuel Johnson, I need to kick something to prove it exists. The problem is that what I am trying to kick is

my own kicking foot. The hard and durable thing (Johnson's rock) seems to set and satisfy its own criteria for existence. You could almost say my criterion for existence is otherness: if it does not think or feel, but is the object of thought and feeling, it exists. Fortunately, existence rubs off. I feel more real when I bump up against things and in this way become a thing for *those* things—the world's world, another's other. But this requires a bizarre imaginative excursion: myself as mud might see me, or water, or ink.

I am feeling my way through some sort of impossible topological figure here, probably a Klein bottle, to explain the outside-inness of my sense of self, but there are other ways to put it. Let's see if this is simpler: there are some parts of me that are permanently unknowable, and one of those things is the very basis of knowing: the body. The mind relies upon something it cannot think, and conversely, the body relies upon something it cannot touch. I'm fascinated with the sticky stretch between matter and sense, both in us and in language. From *Patchwork Girl* to my forthcoming novel *Half Life*, that fascination hasn't changed, but there has been a general movement from the figurative to the literal. The embodied, itinerant word of *Patchwork Girl* has become actual living flesh in *Skin*. The text is not compared to a monstrously aggregate body; it actually is one.

SR: Jay David Bolter titled his early study of electronic textuality *Writing Space*, in part because he was interested in "spatial" or "topographic" writing. Starting with *Patchwork Girl*, your work has explored the material properties of different types of writing spaces: *Patchwork Girl* probably makes more extensive use of the spatial properties of Storyspace software than any of the other well-known hypertext fictions, "My Body" and "The Doll Games" each used different types of visual metaphors on the web, and the "Skin" project

actually lets "words" loose out into the physical world. Could you discuss your view of the relationship of writing to both virtual and physical space?

SJ: I think what I have is less a "view" than a feeling, a sort of itch. I feel that language has a relationship to my body, and I want to make that relationship more literal. Spatializing text makes it more like a body, or an environment for my body, or both, which gives me something to scratch my itch on. Coming from the other direction, I think literal bodies and spaces can strain toward a wordless sort of syntax or story. I love that stretch, and the gap that never quite closes between thingly word and wordy thing.

SR: You've done work as an electronic writer, a print novelist, an illustrator, a performance artist and, perhaps, as a conceptual artist. In doing so, you're a true "multimedia author," crossing boundaries not only of media, but also of cultures and practices. Could you discuss some of the differences between the various cultures you inhabit as a writer and as an artist?

SJ: All these disciplines are weakened by ignorance of one another. In the early days of electronic literature, claims for its revolutionary potential were weakened by ignorance of the long tradition of multilinear, multimedia work in print. Print culture—I'm speaking of the American literary mainstream, not academia or the experimental underground—is no less ignorant of that tradition, and dismisses canon-breaking work as either pretentious esoterica or as falling outside the category of literature altogether, into "art"—where, by implication, anything goes. That judgement only demonstrates literature's towering ignorance of the specific rigors of the art world, of course, but it is true that a much broader range of approaches is not just tolerated but welcomed under the rubric of art. But

artists who use text are often ignorant of precedents in the literary arts, and their writing suffers from too little reading. When I wrote *Patchwork Girl*, it seemed to me I was arguing nothing especially new: the idea that marriages across boundaries of all kinds should and would be made seemed obvious to me. I thought I was just one mutt among many. Now, well, not that I'm claiming to be special, but I am realizing finally that it's harder than I thought to make these weddings, and all the more necessary for that reason.

SR: Could you discuss in general terms the evolution of the "Skin" project? Did the reception the project received surprise you?
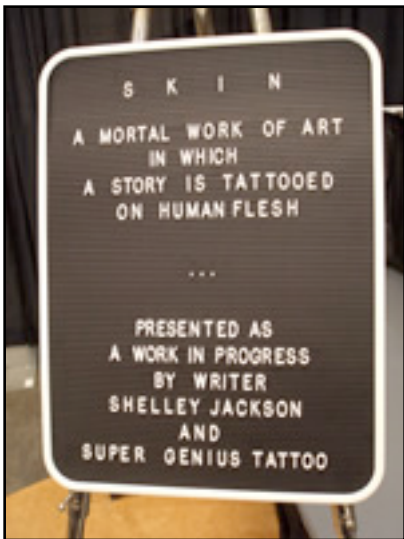
SJ: When I was working on my story collection, *The Melancholy of Anatomy*, I began a story called "Skin." It didn't satisfy me, though, so I never finished it. Later, driving across country on my book tour in the spring of 2002, I had a seemingly unrelated idea: I would publish a story "on America." Every time I pulled off the highway, I'd scratch a word on a rock or tree trunk, leaf or fencepost. I planned to take pictures of the words and post them online along with maps and elaborate driving directions, so that readers could visualize for themselves the way the words arranged themselves in space across the American landscape. An ambitious reader could follow my tracks and try to read the story that way, though I didn't anticipate anyone actually doing it—I thought just raising the possibility was interesting enough. I never did it, but the idea stuck in my mind. And I loved the idea of my words existing not in neat rows on a page but in

meadows dotted with rabbit pellets, on dusty, desolate rest-stops, under buzzing fluorescent lights outside cheap motels. I never did this piece, but the idea and other like it lingered in my mind. I was reminded of it when I saw a documentary on Andy Goldsworthy, the artist who constructs fleeting on-site sculptures out of grass, icicles, pebbles. Last spring, while thinking about how much I liked forms that reflected their content, I thought of my unfinished story "Skin," and suddenly it suddenly occurred to me that there is a kind of "publishing" we already do on skin: tattooing. The idea of publishing a story on volunteers, one word at a time, was only a few mental leaps away. The whole concept of the "Skin" project leapt into my mind in that moment. I put out a call for participants in summer of 2003.

Initially, I thought "Skin" might be a conceptual art conceit, never to be realized. In my initial call for participants I wrote: "If no participants come forward, this call itself is the work." When the first volunteers wrote me, I was astonished. Since then, I've received over ten thousand emails. It has completely changed my understanding of my work, my audience, and even, I must admit, myself. The world called my bluff, and I'm grateful, though I may never fully regain my composure.

SR: When you visited Stockton to give a reading last year, one of your "words" showed up. She seemed to worship you with an almost acolyte-like veneration. It occurred to me that the relationship you have with the people who have had one of your words carved in their flesh must be quite a bit different from the relationship that most authors have with readers, even

dedicated fans. These people will literally remember you until the day they die. Does that feel at all strange to you? In some ways I imagine it could be frightening.

SJ: The existence of the author is a necessary flaw in this (every?) story. But this project makes me keenly aware that I am not the only, or even always the dominant voice in it. I recently took great pleasure in watching three "words" coach a fourth, nascent word through her first tattoo: "Have you eaten anything? Here, have this apple. Do you want us to hold your hand?" My presence was a comfortable irrelevancy to them at that moment.

Furthermore, my story is being rewritten, one word at a time, by my participants. As my words enter the specific contexts of their lives, they change forever. In the end, 2095 other people will have signed their names to my story.

SR: One interesting aspect of the contract that you make with the participants in the "Skin" project is that you've committed to share the whole text of the story only with people who participate as words, so the story will never be published conventionally. With that in mind, do you however envision the project ending with the last tattoo? Or will the project have other manifestations?

SJ: I was quite serious when I called this a Mortal Work of Art. As words die, the story gradually changes; it's possible that the first word will die before the last one has been published, meaning that no complete version will ever appear. But I consider each version of the story legitimate; each successively shorter version of the story that will be created by these deaths is the story too, right down to the one-word story that will be its final printed form. If all my words hold to their promise not to share the story, that will truly be the end. The work includes its own disappearance in its aesthetic project, so it is not complete until it is gone. However, like all living things, each "word" has a complex destiny of his or her own, affecting many other lives, and I consider that part of my project too. When I die, the destiny of the project will fall into the hands of the remaining words, who might decide, who knows, to do something different with it than I intended! Some people have asked if they could will their words to their children, creating a second-generation story.

SR: "Skin" is a project that crosses the boundary between a "work" of literature and the kind of performance art happenings and intermedia advocated by people like Dick Higgins and the Fluxus in the 1960s. As you developed this project and others, do you think in the context of both literary and performance art traditions? Could you discuss your influences?

SJ: I think more about literature than art, not just because I love it, but because it needs me more. I want to force its borders open, and so I call myself a writer, and will probably keep on doing so even as I get further and further from what most people would call writing. Because literature is so tightly circumscribed, one can import just about any question from conceptual or performance art and get something new in response: What if we redefine the work to focus on the means

of distribution? The reader? The "happening" that is reading? Interruptions or failures of reading: pages stuck together, erasures, typos? The blanks between words? The passages you skip? The context surrounding a reading: a particular chair, a smell, sounds, light, snack? The process of circulation? The material support? The decay, dispersal, disappearance of the material support? What if we focus not on the denotative qualities of language but on its mouth feel? The taste of ink? The properties of paper? And so on.

SR: Could you discuss the *Interstitial Library* project? What drives your interest in the project? Are people participating in it?

SJ: Increasingly, I define writing to include, not just the text itself, or the printed book as object, but the whole life of that text—printing, distribution, circulation, reading, rereading, quotation, misquotation, and perhaps eventual disappearance. *The Interstitial Library*, an ongoing collaboration with artist Christine Hill (and eventually many others) aims to investigate, chronicle and celebrate this life. The Library is a siteless book collection curated by volunteers briefed in a theatrical training session, who are invited to go out into the city and slip book cards into their selections—books left on the street, in junk shops, in bookstores, in other libraries--and leave them there for others to find. The library catalogues attributes (e.g. smell, marginal scribblings, living inhabitants) disallowed by regular libraries. The database will evolve from contributors' input a sort of synaptic map of the reading public, as well as a sort of road map of the itinerant word.

SR: You've published a book of short fiction with a major press, you have a well-known New York literary agent, and you're finishing a novel that I expect

will also be published by a major press. You have more of a foot in the conventional New York publishing scene than most other electronic writers. How do the people you work with in conventional publishing regard your experiments in new media writing and public art? Do they consider it a distraction from your "real" work as a fiction writer? Have they expressed any interest in developing or growing an audience for the type of work you do in electronic media?

SJ: For the first couple of years after my first appearance in print most publishers (and most writers too) seemed to view my new media work as irrelevant at best, and embarrassing at worst. Now that the dot.com hyperbole has died down, and electronic media have not only not gone away, but gained a larger and larger audience, the younger editors seem cautiously approving of my work outside publishing. They still seem to view it only as potential publicity, though, out of their sphere and decidedly secondary to it.

SR: In your *TIR Web* interview with Rita Raley a few years back, you said that you didn't think you had yet achieved "the kind of gooey intermingling" you envisioned between image and text. You said then that you had "other projects in mind that would mix art forms very insistently." Was "Skin" the type of project you had in mind?

SJ: I was probably thinking of a work in progress, *The Shelley Jackson Vocational School for Ghost Speakers and Hearing-Mouth Children*. It's a fictional school that comprises text, "scientific" illustrations, maps, photography, wax sculpture, paper crafts, performance and homework assignments.

SR: Does your new novel expand on any of the themes you've been developing in your other work? Could you tell us a bit about the book? Any news on its publication?

SJ: *Half Life* is narrated by one of a pair of conjoined twins, in a looking-glass America where "twofers" form a significant cultural minority with its own subculture, style, and self-help books. Nora, my narrator, is trying to lay claim to what she considers her birthright, the first person pronoun, and her twin is in the way. Unless maybe she *is* the way. Conjoined twins strain the very grammar we use to speak of how they strain the grammar that we use to speak of, etc. Who exactly is the "first person"? Who's writing this book? It will be obvious that I'm still stuck on language, the body, and the ambiguous boundaries of the (monstrous) self.


Half Life will be published by HarperCollins in summer of 2006.

Photos by Scott Rettberg and Andy Smull.

Jane McGonigal is a Ph.D. candidate in performance studies at the University of California at Berkeley, where she is also a researcher with the Alpha Lab for Industrial Engineering and Operations Research. She is a game designer for 42 Entertainment, where her work on pervasive gaming projects like *I Love Bees* (2004) and *Tombstone Hold 'Em* (2005) has been recognized with awards from the International Game Developers Association, the International Academy for Digital Arts and Sciences, and by the *New York Times Year in Review*. Both her research and design practice focus on massively collaborative play and performance in everyday spaces. Jane takes play very seriously.
Her website: <http://www.avantgame.com>.
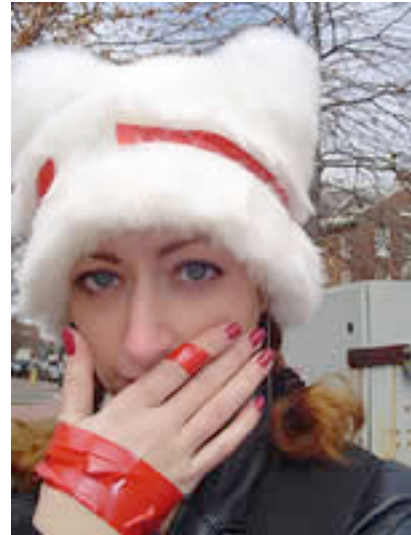
Scott Rettberg: You are completing a Ph.D. in performance studies with an emphasis in New Media Studies. You're also a well known lecturer on and producer of Alternate Reality Games. Could you describe the path you followed to arrive at your expertise in this area? Did you have a traditional theatrical performance study background? Does your interest in games predate your interest in performance?

Jane McGonigal: I was working off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway in New York City for two years before I started graduate school at UC Berkeley. I was especially interested in the live event aspects of theater—both stage managing, working with the actors and the crew on the behind-the-scenes stuff; and house managing, the front-of-house stuff, working with ushers and the theater-goers. Not many people study the latter, house managing, but I found myself very much drawn to it. How you invite people into the theater, the mood you set with the atmosphere of the theater, the music, the programs, how you greet the theater-goers. It's the most direct interface with the people who come to the theater, even more direct usually than the actors, who tend to stay behind the "fourth wall." I'm very much interested in the interface, and so I guess that's why my favorite job before becoming a games "puppet master" was being an usher, of all things, at the Jane Street Theater in Greenwich Village. Every night I was an interface between the show and the audience. I loved that—setting expectations, warming people up for the experience, gauging their reactions. When I started graduate school, I intended to study audiences and reception theory. I guess that was a continuation of my interest in the interface.

My gaming background on the east coast all tends toward the live event realm. For instance, I worked with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation to plan major gaming festival and events, like a massively multiplayer Easter Egg Hunt in Central Park. Any kind of game that was live, in-person, lots of people in a public space… that was my specialty, even before I moved into the digital domain.

Speaking of which, the theater stuff was my night job—by day, I was an original dot.com producer in Silicon Alley. Sadly I did not get rich on stock options, but that was where I first started in the web world.

Funny thing is, while I was toiling away in Silicon Alley, and not getting rich on stock options, and not really loving it, I read this book called *I Could Do Anything I Wanted… If Only I Knew What It Was!* It has chapter after chapter of exercises to figure out your special love and skill in life. It included looking past at your whole life, since early childhood, and looking for things you were consistently successful at and happy doing. I came up with two things: behind-the-scenes theater and designing and running real-world, face-to-face games. I had no idea what to do to find a career in the latter, it seemed so fanciful and impractical and absurd. So I decided to go to grad school for theater. Little did I know I would figure out how to combine the two!

SR: In a general sense, how would you describe the relationship of games and performance? Is every game a performance? Is every performance a game?

JM: Richard Schechner, theater practitioner and founder of the field of performance studies, famously argued in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, the first major performance theory treatise of the 21st century: "Playing is at the heart of performance." In any performance act, Schechner believed, the performer is always already playing. There is no performance without play.

For game studies and game designers, the time has come to acknowledge and to explore the converse of Schechner's proposition: *Performing* is at the heart of *play*.

All game play is performance. There is no gaming without performance.

John Reaves, artistic director for the groundbreaking digital performance group The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theater, once made a bold proposition on behalf of theatre practitioners everywhere, in the essay "Theory and Practice" for the online journal *CyberStage*. In the mid-1990s, from the front lines of digital, interactive theater practice, he wrote: "In the coming century, we can take a timid, parochial view of what theater is, or an aggressive, imperialistic one. […] Why not be aggressive in the tumultuous context of the Digital Revolution? Why not claim all interactive art in the name of theater?" The future of new media, Reaves believed, belonged to the performance artists. All new media art installations provided sufficient grounds for a theatrical event. All new media art installations were playgrounds for performance.

Reaves presented two cases for claiming all interactive art in the name of theatrical performance —the first, phenomenological, the second typological. "Multimedia as art is much closer to theater, and the performing arts in general, than it is to film, video, or the visual arts," Reaves wrote. Because new media art tends toward the live, collaborative and mimetic, it has an essential theatrical quality. This is the phenomenological case. There is also the typological case. "Theater has always been an integrative, collaborative art which potentially (and sometimes

actually) includes all art: music, dance, painting, sculpture, et cetera," Reaves argued. Theater is a total art capable of incorporating all other arts—why not the emerging digital arts, as well?

Reaves claimed all digital art in the name of theater in order to call attention to the potential for live performance as an end-product of digital networks, broadcasts and platforms. His theater company had a vested interest in locating opportunities for embodied action and interaction in an increasingly mediated culture.

For the same reasons, I choose to make a corollary claim. I stake out all digital *game* art in the name of theatrical performance. Art games are not new media installations, objects or systems. They are scripts for embodied action and interaction. They are opportunities for live, collaborative mimesis.

I claim all digital games in the name of theater.

All game play is performance, all digital games belong to theater — but there is more.

The current leading edge of digital game design — the *avant* game — represents a particular kind of performance: *all* performance.

As digital games become more immersive, more pervasive, more persistent, and more massive, they clearly and convincingly approach *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Richard Wagner's classical ideal of "total performance," the theatrical event that encompasses all art practice in a single unified experience.

To what field of art do digital games belong? The visual arts? Yes—think game graphics. The literary arts? Yes—think interactive storytelling. The media arts? Yes—think code, audio production, and A.I. processors. The plastic arts? Sure—think game hardware and innovative interfaces. Architectural arts? Indeed—think real-world game environments.

Digital games belong to all of these art fields simultaneously, and the platform that connects them is performance. It is through the players' collective performance that games create a total aesthetic experience.

Gamers create *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Wagner wrote of his desire for a total performance genre, through which "the public, that representation of daily life, forgets the confines of the auditorium, and lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole World."

Jordan Weisman, game designer, describes the creative vision for his company's groundbreaking alternate reality, massively multiplayer, pervasive games *The Beast* (2001) and *I Love Bees*

(2004): "Install base: Everyone. The entire public. Platform: The world. The entire electronic sphere. If we could make your toaster print something we would. Anything with an electric current running through it. A single story, a single gaming experience, with no boundaries. A game that is life itself."

Weisman channels Wagner. Gaming *Gesamtkunstwerk* is here.

Game designer Ernest Adams recently stated in an interview with *Game Programming Italia*:

> I certainly don't think Wagner would recognize the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in today's video games. They don't contain the breadth and depth of vision that he expected of himself. Could they perhaps be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the future? I'm not sure. We have to remember that Wagner lived in the days before motion pictures, before recorded sound, and in a time when all art was presentational, not interactive. Therefore Wagner's own intentions were informed by an assumption that drama would be live action performed by real human beings directly in front of other real human beings. Because video games do not (and generally will not in the future) include an element of live performance, I don't think Wagner would recognize them as *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Adams is wrong. Digital games do include an element of live performance already. All game play is performance.

Digital game play is dramatic performance. Players act "as if," that magic Stanislavski acting technique; they act as if they believe the rules are *real* limitations, as if the artificial goal is of *real* importance. Digital game play is spectacular performance. Digital game play, especially physical, pervasive and tournament game play, generates attention and audiences. Digital game play is demonstrative performance. Players demonstrate their mastery of the game system, showing off their understanding and skill in manipulating and reading the game system's input, feedback and control mechanisms. Digital game play is expressive performance. Players reveal aspects of their personal identity through their choices in avatar and verbal exchange. And digital game play is, increasingly, about traditional kinds of performance: singing, rhythm, dance, movement, social engineering, and even in-game protest.

The same year that John Reaves claimed all interactive art in the name of theater, new media theorist Lev Manovich wrote in "Reading Media Art" that "We are still waiting for a true digital *Gesamtkunstwerk* which will take full advantage of the ability to interweave the distinct languages of different media."

We are no longer waiting.

All games are performance, and today's avant game is already approaching the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Total performance *is* the state of the digital art game.

SR: On your website you describe yourself as a "big fan of deep play, dark play, and collective play." How do you distinguish between those three forms of play?

JM: Deep play, a topic I learned much about from reading the brilliant Diane Ackerman as well as anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who coined the term, is play with an edge—play that makes you feel really alive, play that helps you experience "flow," play that comes with risk… physical, psychological, or social. People usually think of rock climbing, for instance, but playing in a public space that you are not supposed to play in (cemeteries, for instance!) is just a dangerous as an extreme sport. I specialize in the extreme social risk kind of game, as well as the extreme psychological risk. Lots of these alternate reality games as you to be radically cooperative and selfless. That is deep play!

Dark play, a term I borrow from performance studies co-founder Richard Schechner, is play in which there is no clear frame separating the game and reality. Some players know they're playing, other players might not, and people looking on might mistake the gameplay for reality. I am less a fan of dark play now than I used to be—I prefer "transparent play," which allows onlookers to grok the rule set quickly and join the gameplay.

Collective play is gaming that brings people together to work on a problem together. Everyone is working toward the same goal, and the win condition is either met by everyone or met by no one.

SR: The first project documented on your site, *Get Lost Berkeley*, was an online project that utilized real-world sound and imagery. Your more recent projects seem more focused on interactions in the physical world, supported by material on the internet, text messaging, and other technologies. I'm interested in this transition from projects that are designed to be experienced primarily online to those that are meant to be experienced in the physical world. Do you see a kind of transition taking place in your work?

JM: Actually, *Get Lost Berkeley* was intended to have quite a robust real-world component! For instance, there is a photo of a payphone in the online game, and the audio is an actress reading from Beckett's play *Endgame*. If you went to that payphone, a page from the script was ripped out of the book and stuffed into the coin slot! There were all kinds of real-world traces meant to overlap with the online experience, and we wanted to encourage players to do a kind of game-inspired geocaching. You know, you could take the script page, and leave something behind that reminded you of the game or was meaningful to you in that space. However, at that time in my collaborations, it was difficult to get people as excited as I was about the real-world gameplay. Today, it is much easier—there has been a major transition in both the general art world and gaming world toward reality-based play. Things like geocaching and big urban games have really changed what people understand as games and proper spaces for gameplay.

SR: Some of the projects you've been involved in seem intended to use games as a form of education, others such as *I Love Bees* are ultimately focused on marketing a product, others seem to be making a kind of political argument, and others seem to be art in the traditional sense of art for art's sake. Do you see games as useful in all of those various contexts and how, as a practitioner, do you balance those various purposes?

JM: I start from a core belief that a well-designed game is beautiful. A well-structured experience, an elegantly architected interaction, is a form of art. So any game that I am working on, regardless of the purpose, falls into art practice. Likewise, I do believe that there is a real social good that comes out of encouraging people to play cooperatively, and giving people an opportunity to be powerful and superheroes in everyday public spaces. That means for me there is something political in all of these games, as well. Now, whether is it educational, or a marketing experience, or just something I am doing as design research, I will stand behind every game I work on as art and as a political intervention.

Because I think it might be helpful, let me just paste in a very short manifesto I recently wrote in response to people asking me about my motivations for the Ministry of Reshelving project. I call it "A Minor Statement on Avant Gaming."

I believe:

Games are the dominant art form of the 21st century. Not just videogames (but those too). All games.

We should make benevolent games for all spaces and all technologies.

There should be more benevolent gameplay in public spaces.

Many people find public gameplay threatening. This is not a reason not to play games. It is a reason to play more. It is also a reason to make gameplay transparent, so others will not be confused or alarmed by what you are doing.

Games are serious. Some people dismiss them as "pointless," but they are blind to the power of pointlessness. The power of games is in their intrinsic pleasure. The nature of games is not to point. The nature of games it to experience. And experiences can be extraordinarily powerful things.

Games are a persuasive platform. Games are a self-expressive platform.

Collective gameplay helps us gather the collective wisdom of crowds.

Collective gameplay can mobilize and harness the benevolent power of the public.

There should be more bottom-up decision-making in public spaces. Massively multiplayer collaborative gameplay may help achieve this.

There should be more folksonomy in public spaces. Massively multiplayer collaborative gameplay may help achieve this, as well.

We should define public spaces as the spaces where you can find the public. Rarely will you find the public in public plazas.

We should treat privatized spaces that open their doors to the public, make money off the public, and serve for better or for worse as the primary public and social spheres of our society, more like public spaces.

When powerful and benevolent phenomena emerge online, we should conduct experiments to see if they can be translated into a real-world power as well.

SR: What aspects of alternate reality gaming would you describe as narrative? For instance, how plotted was *I Love Bees*? How much work goes into developing characters? How much does the plot change in reaction to moves that the players themselves make?

JM: I can't speak to the narrative of the games in the sense that these games are telling stories, or unfolding a plot about characters. To be perfectly frank, I often have no idea what the "plot" of the official story of the game is before the game starts; when it's over, I'm lucky if I've caught half of it. The story I help write and tell is the story of the players. My relationship to story and games is in giving players stories to tell about their experiences, creating narratives of their interaction in particular spaces and with each other. I write mission scripts and rule sets that ask players to perform in public spaces, to take actions and create moments, and then I write and document those moments so there is a record of the live gameplay. This can take place on an in-game blog, or an in-game Flickr photo-pool, for instance.

What is the story prompted by a GPS coordinate, a date, and a time? It asks players to locate a physical space, to take whatever (often extraordinary) measures necessary to get there at the right time, and to really be there, ready for anything to happen. The story is the story of what players were feeling, waiting in that spot, for something to happen: the anticipation, the adrenaline, the burning curiosity. The story of how they got there—crossing international borders, driving eight hours, leaving work even though the boss said no, sweet-talking a manager to open a locked door, calling a distant cousin six states over that you haven't talked to in years to go to the location on your behalf, as a personal favor. Those stories about the ingenious, impassioned action and interactions of the players—that's the narrative. This "emergent narrative"—the story of the game, rather than the story told in the game, is a major area of interest for many game designers; I am one of them.

Let me put this another way: In Jane Wagner and Lily Tomlin's great *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life*, a stageplay I first saw when I was ten years old and which has framed the way I think about theater and games since, Lily plays a homeless woman named Trudy who teaches visiting aliens from outer space the difference between "soup" (an actual can of Campbell's soup) and "art" (Andy Warhol's paintings of Campbell soup cans). "Soup, art, soup, art, soup, art"—it's the mantra of the play. Can you tell the difference? At the end of the play—and this is the moment that always stuck with me—Trudy the bag lady takes the aliens to see a play. She asks them what they thought of the actors, and the aliens confess—they were so busy watching the audience that they forgot to watch the stage! They tell her: "The play is soup, but the audience… the audience is art." That is how I feel about gameplay. The game is soup; the gamers are art. I try to tell the story of the gamers' art.

SR: How many people are typically involved in the development of one of the large-scale ARGs such as *The Beast* or *I Love Bees*? What types of roles do the different team members play in the development of these experiences? Could you describe the role that you played?

JM: Well, let me show the credits for ILB to give you an idea. There were four full-time puppet masters, but a much larger team of designers, producers, writers and collaborators: http://ilovebees.com/MIA.html.

In these kinds of projects, I typically specialize in writing the real-world missions and orchestrating the live action reality-based play. I also track and document the live play and the players' creations, to weave them into the official record and story of the game. My role is like a dramaturge (writing the missions), sometimes like a stage manager (running the live play from behind the scenes, or "behind the curtain") and other times like a house manager (when I am hosting the live gaming events "in front of the curtain"), and then as a real-time historian, creating the record and archive of the gameplay.

SR: I'm also curious about the way that ARGs are funded—the fact that both *The Beast* and *I Love Bees* were ultimately designed to promote the release of other major media commodities—the film *AI* and the computer game *Halo 2*. Do marketing goals ever interfere with the development of the ARG itself?

JM: Great question. Actually, for me and my collaborators it has not been a conflict—successful experiential marketing and experimental game design actually share a really close core set of goals and practices. Maybe because the best experiential marketing campaigns to date have been designed and developed by gamers, who understand that games are a perfect social and interactive platform, a "tool for engagement" as I sometimes say.

The goal of games like *The Beast* and *I Love Bees* is to create an immersive experience that is really community-drive, personally rewarding, intensely engaging, memorable, and unlike anything the participants have experience before. This set of goals works equally well as a set of experiential marketing goals—it gets attention, builds good-will and loyalty, and showcases the original IP and brand in a really exciting way—and as a set of experimental game design goals— to develop new tools for engagement.

SR: You were also involved in the development of *Go Game* -- a company that develops corporate team-building experiences based in specific locations and customized for specific companies. Could you describe how the game works? What do you mean when you describe these games as "pervasive"?

I made my debut as a puppet master (PM) on January 19, 2002 as the lead writer and mission designer for an eighty-player *Go Game* in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco—a year and a half before I started organizing flash mobs and two and a half years before I took my place behind the curtain of *I Love Bees*. That day, on the winter-green lawn of a public city park, I experienced a spontaneous rupture in what I had imagined would be a smooth and uncomplicated PM-player dynamic: We tell the players what to do, and they do it. Since that day, the same little *Go Game* kink has emerged again and again in many different genres and contexts. It is a pattern I now recognize as the highly complex, and consistinently collaborative, texture of a puppet mastered game.

A bit of background: *The Go Game* is an afternoon-long urban adventure in which competing teams receive clues over their cell phones to specific locations around their city. When players arrive at each location, they download a superhero-themed performance mission: assemble undercover disguises using whatever you can find at a nearby thrift store; make a secret agent waiting for you on the #30 bus laugh by any means necessary (not that you have any idea which of the dozens of people on the bus the secret agent is); conduct a séance on the floor of a crowded café to improve the psychic atmosphere; figure out how to get onto a luxury hotel rooftop and attract as much attention as you can; get a whole barful of strangers singing and dancing along with you to any song you want to play on the jukebox.

That day, we were putting up only the second *Go Game* ever—Wink Back, Inc. has produced hundreds of games for over 20,000 players across the U.S. since—so as puppet masters, we were still experimenting and making last-minute tweaks to our scripts. Just before the game started, another *Go Game* writer decided to revise the opening text message I had prepared. My text was a bit dry: "Welcome, superheroes! Press GO when you're ready to start the game." We both agreed it would be better to set a more playful mood, so she added a colorful interjection to the welcome message: "Howdy superheroes—hold onto your hats, it's time to drop your pants and dance! Press GO when you're ready to start the game."

I had already forgotten about this minor text change when the teams assembled in Washington

Square Park to receive their first set of instructions. I hid in a group of park-goers and watched as the players huddled in small groups, switched on their phones, and downloaded our welcome message. I was waiting for the teams to scatter and hit the streets—once they pressed "GO," the first round of clues would send each team off in a different direction. But that didn't happen.

Instead, half a dozen players began unbuckling their belts, unzipping their jeans, and showing off their underwear while waving their arms in the air. This caught the attention of other players, who quickly realized—*Aha! 'Drop your pants and dance'—this is our first mission!* So they, too, dropped their pants and started dancing. Before long, most of the players were dancing merrily in their underwear. And they were busy taking photos of each other to 'prove' their success in completing the mission.

Of course, the opening message "drop your pants and dance" wasn't a mission at all. But by the time the park was full of pantless performers, my fellow puppet masters and I were already behind our curtain. There was nothing we could do to intervene. We just watched from a distance, with our mouths hanging open.

The first time I told this story at a lecture, an audience member challenged me: "You puppet masters must really get a kick out of manipulating these players to do whatever you want. That must be such a power trip." But in fact, the opposite was true. We didn't get a rush of power when the players misinterpreted our simple welcome message. We actually felt completely out of control. We had worked so carefully to craft just the right text for our mission scripts, and yet from the very first moment of gameplay, our actual, effective authority was stripped away. Yes, we could give the players a set of instructions—but clearly we could not predict or dictate how they would read and embody those instructions. We were absolutely *not* in control of our players' creative instincts.

In Washington Square Park that day, as the players danced in their underwear, I turned to another puppet master and said, "It's their game now." He nodded, and that's when I realized: No matter what it looked like to outsiders, we were not pulling these players' strings. Yes, the players were following our commands, but their interpretation of the commands left them fully in charge of their own experience. The scripts had been delivered; the actors were putting on the show. In that moment I realized that the players in a puppet mastered game are not performing objects; they are performing subjects. And that performing subjectivity is never ceded, even in submission to a puppet master's orders.

The willful subjectivity of a performer is in its own way a kind of self-determination, a co-authorship with the writers. Media critic Thomas De Zengotita acknowledges this in *Mediated* (2005) when he discusses the flash mob phenomenon as a kind of middle ground between reality and optionality. In the middle of "so many flash mobs… you were being the phenomenon as you were seeing it represented, in real time, unfolding before you. You could see the impact of your role on the national stage in essentially the same way you can see the impact of your button-pressing in a videogame. You were the agent, you were the star" (152). As De Zengotita points

out, performing in the public eye gives players an expressive visibility and an audience that provides the same quality of feedback a digital game offers. The audience reaction becomes the new metric, equally capable of giving players a sense of responsibility for a given outcome.

In *The Go Game*, were the players simply mistaken, or alternately willfully misinterpreting their mission scripts? No, I do not think so. The pushing back was more organic, more instinctive. It was a matter of exuberance and desire, rather than conscious strategy or disruption. In *The Go Game*, players dropped their pants to dance because they wanted to; it seemed like a reasonable interpretation of the game's dramatic text because it was already in the realm of possibilities imagined by the players to be fun and appropriate for that particular time and context.

SR: In addition to *The Go Game* and ARGs, you've also developed or been involved in several different types of "happening" type projects: Flash Mobs, The San Francisco Zombie Mob, Cookie Rolling, and The Ministry of Reshelving. Do you see these projects as fitting into an overall aesthetic?
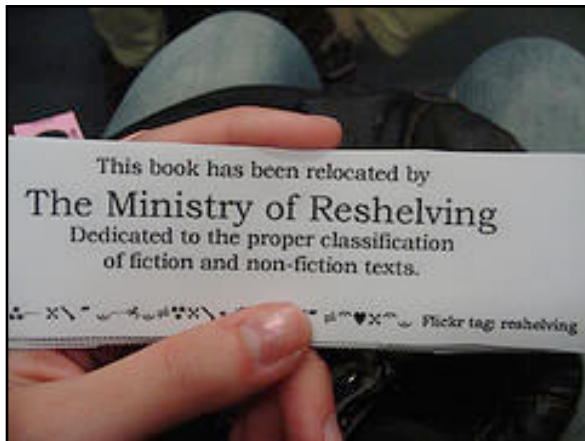
JM: First: An overall aesthetic – yes! Here are the key words: public, social, spectacular (designed to attract attention), transparent (onlookers should understand that it is play and be able to join in), and ludic (structured like a game: a clear goal, a win condition, rules limiting action).

There's plenty of information about all of the projects you mention available on my site, but let me tell you, at least, a secret about Ministry of Reshelving—deep down, that was an experiment in taking "folksonomy" and "social tagging" to the real world, doing to physical media in public spaces what we are so successfully doing in online social network spaces to digital media.

SR: Do you see your work as coming out of a particular tradition or set of traditions?

JM: Some of the traditions I feel a part of, and have been greatly influenced by include: Happenings, Fluxus, Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*, theater games, and good-old-fashioned parks and recreation. Parks and Rec is a hugely overlooked wealth of history and knowledge about how to bring communities together in real-world spaces for play and collective experience.

SR: What are some of your favorite games and why?

JM: Digital: Lucas Arts' adventure game *Grim Fandango*, because it is a love story about the dead, and my husband and I fell in love playing it together over the course of a few weeks when

we first met. We still quote it to each other on a near daily basis; it is the most beautifully told story in a game, and the most character-driven game I have ever played.

Non-digital: Zen Scavenger Hunts. I didn't invent this genre; I think the guys over at the Science Fiction event WorldCon did. But I run them a lot. In a ZSH, you collect your objects and THEN you get a list of what you're supposed to find. You have to prove through creative demonstrations, hacks, performances, mods and fast talking that the stuff you brought before you knew what you were supposed to find is, actually, a PERFECT match for the list. Now, the art of running a ZSH is in the design of the list. Recently, at a ZSH, one of the items on the list was "Edible computing." As a kind of script for performance, you can imagine what amazing and hilarious feats that item produced. Some of the most important writing in game design is the writing of mission scripts and performance prompts—so a ZSH is a great opportunity to experiment with this.

SR: Do you think your work offers any particular lessons to developers of new media narratives about the relationship between physical environments and storytelling?

JM: Stories linger in the places after we experience them. And the stories we tell about our personal experiences in a place help us own that space, to feel comfortable there, to make others comfortable there, to feel alive there. I believe the job of the designers of reality-based games like big urban games and alternate reality games is to figure out: What kind of story would players want to be able to tell about this space? For *I Love Bees*, the space was a payphone; the story that players can tell is a classic superhero, action hero tale: "The phone was ringing. I raced to answer it. The voice on the other end had a special mission for me…" Every time a player walks by that payphone, they remember that they were needed, and that they were successful, and extraordinary. So I believe new media designers need to think about the narratives people want to tell about their everyday spaces, and to design experiences that give players those stories, for the rest of their lives.

Photos courtesy of Jane McGonigal