Abstract
This essay analyzes the age-old struggle of Life and Death as it plays out in the new digital medium. It begins with a consideration of the dramatizations of an on-line improvisational group known as the Plaintext Players. Life and Death are discussed as contestants in a great morality play; as psychological driving force in the performances; as formal textual realm; and as thematic setting. The article goes on to discuss the complex negotiations of subject and object in the intricate interactions of dialogue, action, and spoofing in MOO performances. Finally the author considers “Real Life as Afterlife,” as one of the Players’ performances is transposed onto the real-life stage.

The Plaintext Players are a group of experimental artists and writers who perform improvisational theater on-line [1] [2]. The performance is strictly textual; what is performed is a dramatic narrative in the act of being written. Each of a half-dozen Plaintext Players logs on from wherever he or she may be—and in real life, we are spread over several time zones—to a communal text space known as a MOO (Multi-user Object-Oriented space) [3]. Dialogue, action, and scenery are typed in by the Players, loosely guided by the Digital Director, Antoinette LaFarge [4].

For the audience, each member of which is also logged on to the MOO, the performance is experienced as a slow, uneven scrolling of text from the bottom to the top of the screen. The act of writing is performed live. For both Players and audience, the performance can be an eerily gripping psychological and esthetic experience [5]. It is also hilarious. The comedy of the rough-and-tumble improvisations is so overwhelming that we risk overlooking the darker side of the Plaintext Players’ world—and in particular the starring role of Death.

The Writing Process: A Life of its Own
To an extraordinary degree in the work of the Plaintext Players, the process is the product. Their work thus provides an important model for thinking about literature in these days, as literary criticism slowly turns its attention from the analysis of fixed and finished printed texts to consideration of a written work as an open process, in which any given state of the text is a snapshot in time of a work in flux.

An original performance by the Plaintext Players is an invitation to witness the process of composition of a work of art—and a work of art as a process of composition. It is different from previously known compositional practices. There is no point in looking for the author’s intention, because there are about half a dozen writers performing together. Even the original gleam of guiding light for a performance may come from any of the participants; and the inspiration for a performance is often as circumstantial as an invitation to perform.
The performance is not, however, merely made up on the spot. It is unlike the Dadaists’ practice of the “exquisite corpse,” in which writers continue a text by supplying their part while unaware of what was written before, or artists continue a drawing without having seen the folded-over, previously contributed parts of the drawing. The Plaintext Players all know more or less what is happening. But we never know exactly what is happening; and we do not know exactly when something will appear on the screen.

This is a technical condition of the digital medium, a condition of composing for the M O O , where writing is routed from an individual Player’s computer over the Internet to the M O O server (which can be a continent away) and from the server back to the screens of all those who are logged on. These technical conditions are beyond the control of any of the participants, and in fact give a somewhat out-of-control feeling to the entire enterprise. In other words, the speed and the order of individual parts of the dialogue are “written” by the traffic pattern on the Net.

The technical necessity of composing at great speed while unaware of the lines immediately before one’s own lends to a performance some of the jolting juxtaposition as well as the eerily unconscious depth of a successful “exquisite corpse.” (And we must remember that the examples of exquisite corpses we see in museums represent the successes; heaven knows some of them must have been wastebasket material.)

The aleatoric principles of later twentieth-century art, notably that of John Cage, also inform the practice of the Plaintext Players, whose best moments often arise with startling spontaneity.

While altogether not a well-rehearsed or well-rehearsable genre, the work of the Plaintext Players is most definitely prepared in advance. What is prepared, however, is not the work itself, but the conditions for the arising of the work. The first determination is made by the choice of a story. The original Plaintext Players work was based on Christmas Ein Schauspiel, a scenario by Robert Allen. Subsequent works have been based on Hamlet, Candide, Moby Dick, and the Orpheus myth. These are stories that are sufficiently well-known to both the Players and their audience that the plot and characters can be stretched a great deal while still providing some degree of structure—especially to our expectations, regardless of whether those expectations are met or broken. The stories are also sufficiently well-forgotten—buried in years of postcollege fog, or nodded at though never actually read—that the Players can play to misty cultural assumptions about them. In this sense, a performance might be billed as “The Collective Unconscious Plays Hamlet.”

The reach was perhaps greatest in The Candide Campaign. This was in part because the details of Voltaire’s work were the least well-known of the works enacted. Additionally, Voltaire’s Candide was paired with the plot of a presidential race between Life and Death—to the virtual eclipse of Voltaire’s plot.

Prose Masks, or, Where Does Writing Come From?

Structure is provided not only by the base story, but also by the personalities of the writers who have been assigned to play each character. It must immediately be noted that this is not a new school of method acting. We are talking about several removes of severe mediation. There is no bodily or vocal involvement. Instead there is prose style. However, for a writer writing at dead heat, his or her prose style can be as recognizable—as distinctive—as an actor’s face.

In addition to the mediation of writing itself, there is the mediation of each writer’s M O O character. My PM C - and ID-M O O character is a holy fool named “stay.” It is a fully realized character in that it has a home, haunts, and friends, as well as occupations that include singing and playing the piano. In some ways, stay is a more fully realized character than I am. Stay meditates between me and the character I play in any Plaintext Players drama. Claudius, Candide, Orpheus—these were all played not by M arlen, but by stay. When the actors took bows at the end of Plaintext Players shows, it was stay who blushed to applause. On the M O O , there is never a maskless reality.

And yet, as O scar Wilde said, “The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks” [6]. The many levels of mediation in a Plaintext Players drama yield a fractured vision that is nevertheless resplendent with something of each Player. The shining was on the face of Cathy Caplan, another Plaintext Player I met one night after we had seen a real-life performance based on The Candide Campaign. (I have never met some of the others.) She had played “howweird,” a horse who ran with Candide for vice-president. “Once I had a horse,” she said, “named Howard. A gray horse.” Her eyes gleamed with the joy of something only she could see. “I would call him,” she said, “how-w-e-e-e-e-r!” In her whinnying call I heard the name of the character she created decades later out of the memory of her love for Howard. Cathy played the M O O -character “headhunter” playing a horse, howweird. She snapped back to reality and looked me in the eyes. “He liked to run.”

In my own case, the torrential optimism of stay and/or Candide has nothing in common, superficially, with my own rather melancholic personality. Yet in the process of rapidly writing the roles of stay and Candide—not to mention O rpheus—I have sung triumphantly for Life—stupid, stumbling, onward-rushing Life. Not Death, Life. That’s all. I don’t know where it comes from. I’m not even that fond of it, really. But one way to see the work of the Plaintext Players is as a series of morality plays—the drama of Life against Death.

Life Against Death: A Psychological Morality Play

Writing is immortal, or at least stands a chance of becoming so. As Flaubert would have it, “I’m dying, and that bitch Bovary will live forever” [7]. It is not because any of our plays is a masterpiece, but because of the prominence of writing itself that the work of the Plaintext Players moves us to consider that realm beyond our mortal being. The digital realm of a Plaintext Players production offers the possibility of a technologically created third space, a space beyond life and death, in which the contest between the two can be staged.

The role of Death is an inordinately large and varied one in the work of the Plaintext Players, and makes itself felt at several levels. The individual plays can each be seen as versions of one great morality play. It is a paradox that in being played...
out on the tiny screen by actors who are smaller than life, the characters achieve an almost allegorical grandeur that is larger than life. This is seen clearly in *The Candi-
dide Campaign*, where the young Candide, brimming with lunatic vision, casts himself into the lists against Baron Samedi, a Voodoo loa and head of the Death Party [8]. Candide and the Baron are running for president; president of what is never speci-
fied. Watching this play, the audience—real life or on-line—is implicitly asked to cast its vote for Life—or Death. Most peo-
ple are dead, maintains the Baron, and so will vote for him. There is no clear reason to vote for Candide, except for his very presence, the alternative he offers to casting one’s lot with the inevitable. What if we just said no? What if, in the face of the obvious, we voted for the youth and the horse? For the inchoate urge to live?

Even more, what if, like Candide, we voted for voting? For the struggle itself? The very context of Life against Death, and not the outcome, is the heart of the matter. The story of the struggle, and not the victory or defeat, is what will live on. Like an ancient Greek hero, Candide relies on the story to survive him. “Young girls will sing my praises,” he says to the Infant of Prague. “My campaign will live forever.” In telling this to a young child, Candide is the first, already within the play itself, to enact the transmission of the tale. The never-ending transmission echoes the importance of the process of writing as well as the ongoing theme of the struggle of Life and Death.

The morality-play aspect of the Plaintext Players’ work is reinforced by the technological medium. These dramas are, after all, performed by MOO characters, with the special abilities and even starker limitations of word-puppets. Their speeches and gestures are somehow larger than life, and are indications rather than embodiments of the story. In any case, the audience knows the story, just as a medieval audience watching a morality play knew the story of salvation. The thrill is in recognizing the story as it is reenacted in a new medium. We know the story of Life against Death, and we know what happens in the end: Death wins—and Life triumphs. At this level, the Plaintext Players make no more sense than the Resur-

---

Fig. 1. “The Lament of the Body Parts and Rocks” at the conclusion of *Orpheus: Sono.la.Musica* is a choral song in MOO-mode. Repetition, rhyme, and rhythm create waves of poetic effects. Spoofing allows any number of Players to adopt a persona, and the technique is echoed in the composite characters of the body parts and rocks. The random introduction of extra blank lines is a new form of punctuation native to the MOO, and echoes the random timing of the appearance of text on the computer screen.
A Digital Space Beyond Life and Death

The digital world of MOO space enables the Plaintext Players to enact the primal story of the struggle of Life and Death in a contemporary technological medium. The eerie conjunction of presence and absence on the MOO offers itself as a new artistic and psychological dimension. Antoinette LaFarge offers this personal account of her initial experience of the Post

Fig. 2. Candido (Giovanni Pucci) tells his story to the Infant.of.Prague (Megan Welch), who toys with the globe of the universe. Photo courtesy of Antoinette LaFarge.

...but neither drama addresses our rational faculties.

The dramas of the Plaintext Players spring rather from some deep wellspring of psychological drama cast as world event. Where does this force come from? On the one hand, I believe it is the force contributed by each Player as she or he types as quickly as possible whatever comes to mind, without censorship by that niggling voice that says, “This isn’t perfect, that isn’t serious, this has to be retyped.” I have laughed till I cried reading the text of a play in progress, knowing that this is ridiculous and yet that this is exactly how it is.

The other factor in the emotional power of the Players’ work is just this funnelling down to the struggle between Life and Death. Perhaps this is the bedrock of the human psyche—or perhaps we are just half a dozen obsessive people who have found one another, and who somehow agree that the driving force of Life is Death.

Modern Culture MOO:

I fell in love with MOOspace right away, in the spring of 1994 when Heather [Wagner] and I first went on PMC. Partly because being on MOO with Heather was so much fun. Partly (not that I realized it until much later) because it was then only a couple months since my mother died and I already had the feeling of living constantly in two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead and not belonging fully to either. So being on this third world, which is both something of an underworld itself and also a place of infinite rebirth, was easy. It was the only place I felt at home at the time [9].

While they may be personal, painful, and not easily theorized, I believe it is important to acknowledge and begin thinking about individual artists’ experience of digital “being,” especially in the cases of artists and writers who create work that is native to this realm. It is especially urgent to explore the discontinuities (or are they in fact the continuities?) between the highly comic performances of the Players and the darker wellsprings of their art.

What are the more textual formal dimensions of this concern with the struggle of Life and Death? From their earliest performances, the Plaintext Players have developed an area of text called the DownUnderWorld, described as a kind of cross between Australia and hell. It is a dimension of textual recapitulation, a place where the dead—characters, that is—return to life, almost the way that real-life actors, even those whose characters died in the plot—return to take a bow.

Thus, at the end of Little Hamlet, the characters who at the end of Shakespeare’s drama are pretty uniformly deceased are reanimated for a final scene in the DownUnderWorld. This is the time for recapitulation. It is a remarkably musical form of ending, a coda, as every theme and every character chimes in one last time. It is a time for commentary, either on one’s own character or on others’, or on the net result. The repetition and recapitulation are suffused with forgiveness and longing, and serve to wrap up the drama in a way reminiscent of a funeral, when the accomplishments and dear qualities of the departed are rehearsed one last time, and the story of a life is called into being by death.

The digital format of the drama is conducive to this fluid transition from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. It’s all words on the screen. It would seem awkward in a real-life stage drama for the actors lying “dead” on the floor to stand up and start talking again. Verisimilitude is, however, not an issue for the Plaintext Players. It’s all words. And the sheer familiarity of the dramas somehow lends to the feeling that it’s over before it begins; so what if, at the end, we succumb to repetition compulsion and start all over again? And after all, the greatest fear we can hope to overcome by repetition is our fear of Death. Perhaps if we rehearse it often enough, we can wrestle down Death.

Digital programming (by Robert Allen) provided a new formal textual space for Death in the Plaintext Players’ improvisation, Silent Orpheus (part of A Day Without Art, 1997). For this performance, the screen was divided vertically into three columns: one each for Earth, the Gates of Hell, and Hell. Each character’s text appeared in the appropriate location, creating a textual stage set. Most of the text for a given scene would appear in one of the three columns, but sometimes a Player whose character was located elsewhere contributed from that column. Hades and Eurydice always spoke from Hades, the mænads and a character named Vinny spoke from Earth, and Cerberus was always at the Gates of Hell, while Orpheus traveled from column to column. Hades and the mænads offered commentary from their respective locations even during scenes where the action was elsewhere; they thus became a sort of audience, or participatory spectators, for the shifting main column of text. For example, in the scene where Vinny discusses the fate of Orpheus with the mænads on Earth, Hades begs them not to kill this awful poet and thus send him back to Hell. As Hades complains, “I already have Wallace Stevens.”

The DownUnderWorld has its own time, namely the final scene, in a Plaintext

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/leon/article-pdf/32/5/359/1569831/002409499553578.pdf by guest on 30 July 2021
Players performance; and the screen divisions of "Silent Orpheus" gave Death its own space [10]. In addition, there are thematic roles for Death that extend across the series of improvisations. Some of the scenes, one play and another, are set in the so-called “Everyglades.” In The Candide Campaign, for example, this liminal space was announced as “The Everyglades, Final Home of Little Bits of Crazed People and Other People So Old They May Not Be Alive Anymore.” This swampy region is infested not only with dead souls, but with tiny body parts.

The tiny body parts motif (Fig. 1) originated with the disaster of the spaceship Challenger, which exploded over real-life Florida and over the imaginary space of the Plaintext Players’ Everyglades. (Ever after, at difficult moments, the demonic character Monkey-General [11] “adjusts her NASA space cap.”) The tiny body parts function as a collective character, arranging and rearranging themselves to participate in the action, as when they line up in rows and rearranging themselves to participate in the action, as when they line up in rows to vote in The Candide Campaign. They also figure in the musings of the characters, as when Monkey-General and Candide wonder about the choral identity of the resident of the Tomb of the Unknown Astronaut. The Astronaut is a fitting hero for our artistic cyborgs: he is dead, his identity is unknown, there is more—or less—than one of them in there, and it’s not a “he.” The fracturing and recomposition of subject identity is thereby dramatized in the work of the Plaintext Players. Such “characters” as the tiny body parts also raise the question of whether they are subjects or objects—and whether they are dead or alive.

**Subjects and Objects: Dead or Alive?**

The technological opportunities offered by the new digital medium include an impressive ability to navigate between the status of subject or object. When contributing lines of text to the onward-scrolling M O O space, a user types the quotation-mark key and then some text, to have it appear on every user’s screen as, in my case,

```
:stay says, “Have a nice day.”
```

In addition to thus producing dialogue, a M O O character can contribute action statements. If I type:

```
:dances to the beat
```

what appears on everyone’s screen is:

```
stay dances to the beat.
```

In both these cases, of dialogue and action, a given character’s name appears as the first word on the line: “stay says,” “X” or “stay does X.” There is a way to circumvent this automatic attribution of dialogue or action to the character whose user types it in. This is done with the “announce” command, in a process known as “spoofing.” A user can add the announce feature to his or her character’s M O O abilities. Then, whenever he or she types:

```
an Have a nice day.
```

what appears on the screen is simply:

```
Have a nice day.
```

The announce feature is useful for contributing anonymous commentary to an ongoing performance. It is especially useful for contributing stage directions, including textual scenery. The use of the announce command for both purposes adds something distinctively digital to a Plaintext Players performance. Commentary is on a formal par with stage direction and description; commentary—the musings of the Players—thus functions as a form of intellectual scenery. In M O O space, thoughts as well as objects set the stage.

The announce command has yet another function. In addition to anonymity, it can provide digital disguise. If I type:

```
an Digital.Director says, “Have a nice day.”
```

what appears is:

```
Digital.Director says, “Have a nice day.”
```

On the screen, this is indistinguishable from a speech act typed in by Digital.Director herself. It can happen that one stands by helplessly as another Player takes over one’s character.

An even more radical use of the announce command can create a truly collective character. As we were improvising the final act of The Candide Campaign, all struggling with the question, “Who will be elected?”, I had a vision of the Infant of Prague, arrayed in imperial robes and holding in his extended hand the globe of the universe. It came to me with the force of recognition that I experienced when, as a child myself, I first saw a statue of the Infant, and understood that this child was the ruler of the universe. The instantly created digital Infant.of.Prague towered over the contest between the Baron.Same
di and Candide, and yet was indeed a child who climbed into Candide’s lap to listen to a story.

In order to have the Infant say and do things on the M O O stage, I used the announce command. In short order, the Infant.of.Prague was taken up by other Players; by whom, I do not know, because they too were using the announce command, and so could not be traced. The Infant was as real—or, at least, as functional—as any character created by a single Player in that scene.

The intricacies of dialogue, action, and spoofing pose interesting questions for the analysis of subject/object relations, and the struggle of Life and Death. In no other medium I know is the animating force behind an artistic character so unhinged from the force of the character of one human being. The work of the Plaintext Players provides complex instances and even limit cases of thoroughly functional collective subjects—or are they objects? Their puppet-like nature places them somewhere in between.

Another complexity lies in the M O O characters’ ability to appear as representations of either people or things. One of the characters in The Candide Campaign was “signpost” [12]. Signpost carried out deliberate actions, such as pointing: “signpost points due north.” Such an action can border on dialogue, if, for example, “signpost points due north” in response to a question. And should we read signpost’s action as the action of a subject or an object, as
acting or being acted upon, in the line, “signpost spins in the wind”? 

Another instance of unexpected animation came in an earlier improvisation, Little Amlot. In the graveyard scene, where Hamlet addresses the exhumed skull of his father’s court jester, I was inspired to take on the role of the skull and talk back [13]. Let’s face it: Hamlet can be unbearable, and who better to point this out than the court jester? In addition to the shock of being addressed by a supposedly inanimate object, spectators received a further formal jolt in that the delivery of a famous monologue was reversed, as the Skull of Yorick cried, “Alas, poor Hamlet!” In this improvisation, the very delivery of the monologue was a struggle between the living and the dead.

Real Life as Afterlife

The text of The Candide Campaign has acquired an afterlife in real life. In August 1998, it was performed by live actors before live audiences as part of the Fringe Theater Festival in New York (Fig. 2). LaFarge adapted the text for the stage, and retitled it after a line from the improvisation: Still Lies Quiet Truth. The play was directed by Robert Allen. It was performed again, with a somewhat different cast, as part of Digital Salon 5, in November 1998 [14].

It was heartening to experience the robust reach of the text as it morphed into a new medium. It is gratifying to think of the play reaching new and larger audiences through a more traditional theater form. It is also intriguing to trace what is lost in the transition.

"Where did my part go?” asked Cathy Caplan pointedly, after one of the Fringe performances.

"It was mostly action,” replied LaFarge.

Dialogue from the on-line improvisations remains largely unchanged, though LaFarge rearranged and even reasigned speeches. She spread the role of “reporter” [15] over three stage reporters who, together with newly-created “spectators,” “got, as their part of the dialogue, a good deal of what had been commentary in the improvis— as a way of keeping the material” [16].

By keeping the commentary in the form of dialogue, however, the flow and interpenetration among the genres of dialogue, action, and commentary/scenery established in the strictly textual performance is lost [17]. Real-life theater has other, non textual levels of meaning at its disposal, such as vocal and facial expression, music, choreography and costuming; this production was enhanced by the use of animal masks for howweird and Monkey-General [18].

It would be a mistake, however, to say in retrospect that the on-line improvisation had served merely to generate the text that could subsequently be fleshed out on a real-life stage. We must, as I have tried to do here, develop both theory and criticism appropriate for assessing artistic work that is native to the new media. As I hope this essay has shown, the digital world of the Plaintext Players has its own complexities and its own dramatic contribution to make to even such a lofty, terrible, and hilarious struggle as that of Life against Death.

References and Notes

1. With this essay, the author would like to wish a very happy 70th birthday to her Doktorvater, Professor Robert Scholz of Brown University.

2. There have been other on-line theater productions. Ham.net was a performance in which Players simply typed in the lines of Shakespeare’s play, Adrienne Wortzel, who has performed with the Plaintext Players, directed The M oosehead M stories in one performance of which I took a small part. W ortzel also recently directed an off-line performance of The Kalevala, the Finnish national epic.

3. The theaters in which the Plaintext Players perform have been programmed by Robert Allen on the Post Modern Culture MOO, housed on a server of the University of Virginia, and 1D M OO, housed on a server of the School of Visual Arts.

4. LaFarge is founder of the Plaintext Players. Over the years the troupe has included Cathy Caplan, Marlena Corcoran, Joe Ferrari, Thessy M ehari, Richard Smoley, Heather Wagner, and Adrienne W ortzel.


8. Baron.Samedi was played by Richard Smoley.


11. Monkey-General was played by Lise Patt.

12. Signpost was played by Heather Wagner.

13. Talking back is of great importance in the M OO theater of the Plaintext Players. Commentary is vastly more important than it would be in live, dialogic theater. Similarly important is the role of recording, as evidenced by such characters as “reporter” (played by Joe Ferrari) and “History-Herself” (played by Antoinette LaFarge).

14. The cast for the live Fringe Festival performance was:

   History-Herself: Melissa Phipps
   Monkey-General: Megan Welch
   Baron.Samedi: Kevin Keaveney
   Candide: Giovanni Pucci
   Howweird: Kevin Keaveney
   Infant.of.Prague: Megan Welch
   Reporters: David Heckel, Erika Larson, Melissa Phipps
   Spectators: David Heckel, Erika Larson, Melissa Phipps

15. In the M OO performances, Reporter was played by Joe Ferrari.

16. Antoinette LaFarge to the author, e-mail communication, May 1999.

17. Two variations in the incorporation of M OO text into the stage performance as dialogue occurred in the music (Joe Ferrari was sound director), and in the projection of M OO-text scenery onto the back wall.

18. The animal masks were designed by Cristina Ruales-Desrosiers and made by H unter N ebitt Spence.

Marlena Corcoran is a writer and electronic narrative artist. She is the author of the Internet fiction, “Worst Case Scenario” (blast5drama and New York Digital Salon 5). As a member of the Plaintext Players, her roles have included Candide (Postmasters Gallery, NY) and Orpheus (Venice Biennial 1997 and documenta X). Her latest published essay, “You Some Kinda Foreigner?,” deals with her recent move to Munich.

Marlena Corcoran, Life and Death in the Digital World of the Plaintext Players

364