

# Deconstructing & Reconstructing Digital Narrative

## The Infinity of Gaming/Meaning

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### Abstract:

This study deconstructs the digital award-winning interactive poem *Loss of Grasp* by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckart where the reader/player experiments loss of grasp with the character while he/she is losing definite meaning in the continuous process of de-constructing and re-constructing the text. The study of this highly interactive fiction also explores how narrative theory tries to cope with the forms and formats of this new medium. In this respect, the study aims at crossing the borders created by this sophisticated computer-based medium of narrative. While attempting the disambiguation of the digital narrative, existential and absurdist dimensions are unraveled in the examined text. Moreover, the study capitalizes on the re-contextualization of postmodern techniques in this unconventional medium of narrative with a special reference to the complexity of time, gaming and manipulation, hyperreality, irony, and metafiction. As a digital narrative, *Loss of Grasp* presents an interactive approach to narrative time that subverts traditional expectations of control and closure, introducing new conceptions of temporal dynamics and the human experience of time. In this respect, this research paper explores the extent to which print-oriented narratological approaches set by classical narratologists can be adapted to analyse digital narrative where contemporary narratologists show great and growing interest. The role of audience interaction is also highlighted to showcase how unconventional narratives blur the lines between production and reception, further complicating the notion of time.

Keywords: Digital narrative – gaming –contemporary narratology – postmodernism – time - absurdism

### Introduction

Digital Fiction refers to works of fiction specifically designed to be read on digital devices, such as computers, tablets, or smartphones. These can be web-based or app-based. Unlike e-books—which are simply digital versions of print books—digital fiction is "born digital," in the sense that its artistic and structural integrity depends on the digital medium of narrative. Removing it from this format would diminish its aesthetic or narrative impact. Digital fiction, as defined by the Digital Fiction International Network in "A [S]creed for Digital Fiction", is "fiction [that is] written for and read on a computer screen [and] that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al. 2010). Digital fiction often incorporates interactive elements such as hyperlinks, animations, sound effects, or even mini games. While e-books follow a linear page-turning format, digital fiction frequently allows readers to shape the narrative—whether by choosing hyperlinks, influencing a character's path, or

engaging with the storyworld dynamically. As a result, reading digital fiction requires active participation, distinguishing it from traditional or digitized literature. Examples include hypertext fiction, Flash fiction, and certain narrative-driven video games. In fact, recent research in digital fiction has moved from a first wave of mostly theoretical and philosophical debate to a second wave of close stylistic and semiotic analysis. In their *Reading Digital Fiction: Narrative, Cognition, Mediality*, Bell and Ensslin argue (2024: 2):

Typically, yet not exclusively, digital fictions can be read, played, or experienced in multilinear ways, and readers often make choices about their journey through the text or storyworld by, for example, following links or responding to textual or visual prompts from the work. Readers are therefore involved in the construction of these multimodal narratives and must interact throughout the reading experience.

This study deconstructs the digital award-winning interactive poem *Loss of Grasp* by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckart where the reader/player experiments loss of grasp with the character while he/she is losing definite meaning in the continuous process of de-constructing and re-constructing the text. This study of a highly interactive work of fiction also examines how narrative theory attempts to adapt to the unique forms and structures of this emerging digital medium. In doing so, it seeks to transcend the boundaries imposed by this sophisticated, computer-based storytelling format. Through an effort to clarify the nature of digital narrative, the analysis reveals existential and absurdist themes within the selected text. Additionally, the study draws on how postmodern narrative techniques are re-contextualized in this unconventional medium, with particular attention to the complexity of time, gameplay and manipulation, hyperreality, irony, and metafiction. As a digital narrative, *Loss of Grasp* offers an interactive engagement with narrative time that challenges traditional notions of control and closure, presenting new ways of understanding temporal experience and human perception of time. In this context, the research investigates how far traditional, print-based narratological frameworks—developed by classical narratologists—can be adapted to analyze digital narratives, an area that is increasingly attracting the interest of contemporary narratologists.

## Literature Review

In the contemporary terrain of literature and art, the emergence of digital-born poetry represents more than a simple technological evolution; it marks a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand narrative, experience, and poetic form. Digital poetry, particularly graphic or multimedia poetry, has grown into a sophisticated and autonomous literary mode, blending textual, visual, auditory, and kinetic components into an experience that transcends traditional reading. One of the most significant and illuminating examples of this genre is *Loss of Grasp* (2010) by Serge Bouchardon, an interactive digital poem that places the user in a dynamic relationship with the text, unraveling both narrative coherence and the illusion of control. The evolution of digital poetry can be traced back to the experimental impulses of early electronic literature in the late 20th century, driven by the democratization of personal computing and the rise of internet-based textual dissemination. According to N. Katherine Hayles, “electronic literature refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer” (*Electronic Literature*). This includes works that could not

exist in print due to their dependence on algorithmic, interactive, or multimedia functions. Unlike print poetry, which relies on typography, or performance poetry, which embodies oral tradition and presence, digital poetry exploits code, interface, movement, and interaction as meaning-making devices. It is precisely this multimodal capacity that distinguishes digital poetry as a self-reflexive genre that embeds critique and narrative within its technological form (*Electronic Literature*).

Graphic digital poetry asserts a unique identity by integrating visual, textual, and interactive modalities. What distinguishes it from video poetry is its emphasis on reader interactivity and computational responsiveness. Whereas video poetry blends visual and auditory modes in linear playback, graphic digital poetry is fundamentally nonlinear, participatory, and generative. The user's movement, gesture, or click becomes a constitutive part of the poem's unfolding: an idea at the core of *Loss of Grasp*. To appreciate the genre from which *Loss of Grasp* emerges, one must understand the long-standing distinction between different poetic forms. Traditional lyric poetry privileges introspection, musicality, and emotional resonance. Performance poetry, often rooted in oral traditions and spoken words, emphasizes temporality, audience interaction, and embodiment. Visual poetry situates meaning in layout and form. Cinematic poetry incorporates filmic strategies to blend image, sound, and language into nonlinear or collage formats. However, none of these forms, despite their richness, allows for the deeply personalized interactivity and recursive feedback that digital-born poetry affords. Graphic digital poetry is not merely a hybrid of visual and textual elements—it is a fundamentally interactive experience. As Talan Memmott argues in “Beyond Taxonomy: Digital Poetics and the Problem of Reading,” digital literature operates “beyond the constraints of conventional genres, where the form of a work is a system of potentialities more than a vessel for fixed content” (Memmott 293). *Loss of Grasp* exemplifies this potentiality by continually redefining the relationship between the reader and the text. The user is not simply decoding meaning but generating it through gestures, pauses, failures, and repetition. The poem resists being passively read; it must be enacted and inhabited.

Serge Bouchardon – the designer of the poem/game - is a Professor of Communication Sciences at Sorbonne University and the Université de Technologie de Compiègne in France. His research explores digital creation, with a particular emphasis on digital literature. As an author, he examines how gestures play a role in shaping meaning. In examining Serge Bouchardon's *Loss of Grasp* using a postmodern lens, one finds that through its interactive digital format, it allows users to navigate a fragmented narrative that resists a singular interpretation, illustrating the fluidity and instability of reality and associating it with the postmodern uncertainty and relative reality. Bouchardon's work also employs an ironic perspective on the illusion of control in a digital age, where the user's/character's choices are ultimately subverted whenever they get the impression that they are in full control. It becomes a continuous game of deception where the main character/player is always manipulated and continuously deceived. *Loss of Grasp* also utilizes multimedia elements that disrupt linear storytelling. In their *Reading Digital Fiction: Narrative, Cognition, Mediality* (2024: 2), Bell and Ensslin assert this temporal disruption as they argue that digital fiction “seeks to explore new, medium-specific, and transmedial forms of narrative expression and engagement and therefore simultaneously continues and disrupts the history of prose writing”. *Loss of Grasp* is also characterized by its genre hybridity as it combines literary, visual, and auditory elements, blurring the boundaries between text and digital art, creating a collage of influences that challenge the reader's/player's perception. To achieve the aims of the study, the research paper rests on seminal works in classical narratology such as Gerard Genette's

“Boundaries of Narrative” (1976) and *Narrative Discourse: An Essay Method* (1980). This is in addition to contributions to digital humanities as found in contemporary narratology such as Alice Bell’s and Astrid Ensslin’s ““Click = Kill”: Textual You in Ludic Digital Fiction” (2010), ““I know what it was. You know what it was”: Second-Person Narration in Hypertext Fiction” (2011) and *Reading Digital Fiction: Narrative, Cognition, Mediality* (2024).

## **Research Aim**

This study examines the re-contextualization of postmodern narrative strategies within the unconventional framework of digital media, with a focused inquiry into the intricate dynamics of temporality, game structures and user manipulation, hyperreality, irony, and metafictional devices. The study, therefore, explains some of the significant points of intersection which come into existence as a consequence of the encounter of narratology with certain aspects in gaming resulting in generating new dimensions of meaning. This study delves into how the digital narrative of Serge Bouchardon’s *Loss of Grasp* disrupts traditional notions of story-time and discourse-time, reflecting the existential and absurdist ideologies that question the very nature of time and existence. As an exemplar of digital narrative, *Loss of Grasp* facilitates an interactive engagement with narrative temporality, subverting conventional expectations of narrative control and resolution. In doing so, it articulates novel conceptualizations of temporal experience and interrogates the human perception of time within digitally mediated environments. The role of audience interaction is also highlighted to showcase how unconventional narratives blur the lines between production and reception, further complicating the notion of time.

## **Research Methods:**

The research adopts a theory-driven approach, combining classical narratology with contemporary digital narrative theory to explore how interactive digital fiction generates new dimensions of meaning. Central to the methodology is the textual and structural analysis of *Loss of Grasp*, with a particular focus on how the narrative disrupts conventional distinctions between story-time and discourse-time. This disruption is examined in light of existential and absurdist ideologies that question the nature of time and existence. The study also emphasizes the role of audience interaction in shaping narrative experience, highlighting how the boundaries between production and reception are increasingly blurred in digital narratives. Foundational theoretical frameworks are drawn from classical narratology, alongside insights from contemporary digital narratology and digital humanities. This combination allows for a comprehensive analysis of how narrative structures evolve in response to the affordances of interactive media.

## **Discussion and Results**

It’s worth noting that Serge Bouchardon’s *Loss of Grasp* (2010) was developed in collaboration with Vincent Volckaert, and it stands as a foundational digital poem that defies traditional definitions of poetry, authorship, and control. Structured across six interactive scenes, the poem’s multimodal presentation demands not only interpretation but also physical and

psychological investment from the reader. However, as it immerses users deeper into its digital fabric, it enacts a powerful paradox: the more one interacts, the less in control one becomes. This phenomenological tension is precisely what distinguishes *Loss of Grasp* from other forms of poetry—print, performance, or even video-based digital poetry. Here, the interface is not just a medium but a participant in meaning-making.

The award-winning interactive poem *Loss of Grasp* tells the story of a man who has come to the acute realization that he has lost control on his life and potentially the love of his wife and son. The story of his *Loss of Grasp* is told through six movements, each one presenting texts and environments that respond to readers' input through mouse and keyboard. Each movement contains an interface that advances the narrative while producing an emotional response in the reader. The digital creation requires headphones (or loudspeakers) and a webcam (for the fifth scene). The poem/game was first designed to be read/played on the web; later on, this digital text/game could be freely downloaded as a mobile app. Its software is updated in each mobile update like any other mobile app, and the fluidity of meaning, in turn, increases. When the app is tapped, the following interface appears:

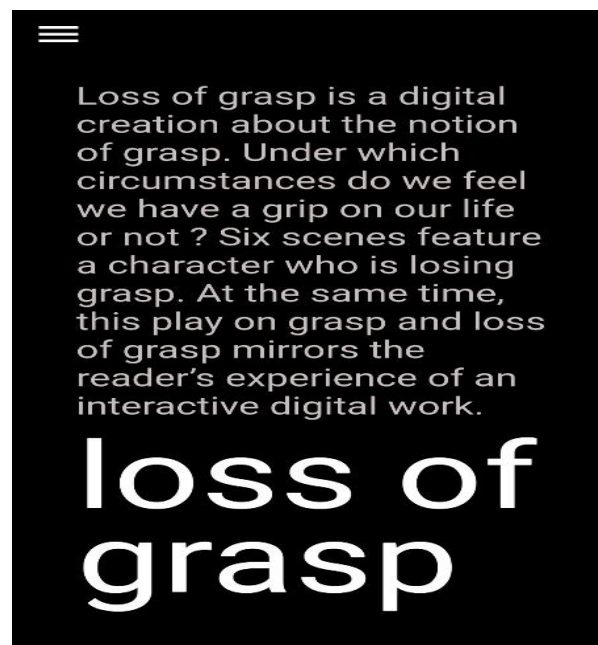


Figure 1.1

This interface is followed by another one that reflects the menu the reader/player must choose from to start figuring out and decoding this ambiguous and continuously changing text that comprises six scenes as seen in figure 1.2 below:

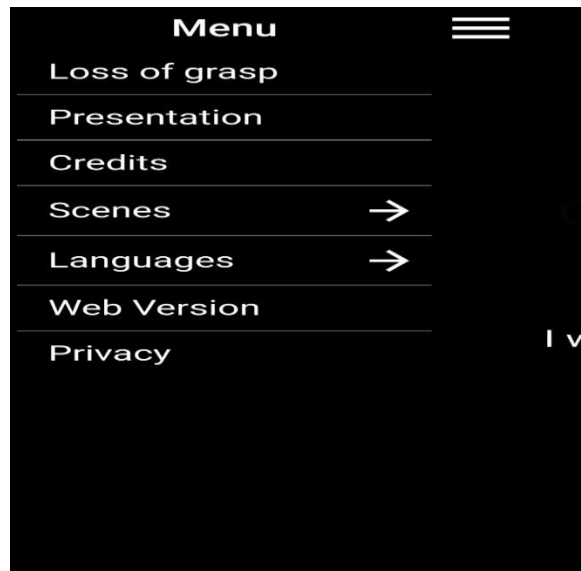


Figure 1.2

While starting our interaction with the digital poem/game, we find ourselves doubly embodied: embodied as actual users of software and hardware and re-embodied through our fictional representations as implied readers/players in the virtual domain. As a digital text of a highly interactive nature, Bouchardon's *Loss of Grasp* consistently and deliberately uses the imperative second-person perspective, often combining present-tense narration and direct commands to immerse the reader/player. In their *Reading Digital Fiction: Narrative, Cognition, Mediality*, Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin examine the second-person narrator in a digital game. They, therefore, argue that "videogames often use the second person to tell the protagonist/player what their mission is in the game world ... Unlike text-based Ifs and hypertext fictions, however, in a videogame the player sees their alter ego embodied in the shape of an avatar, an object, vehicle, or simply a cursor that they can control, further cementing the relationship between the "you" and the player" (Bell & Ensslin 2024:18). In this respect, engaging with digital fiction requires a distinct relationship with the text. As we interact with a computer, our physical presence merges with the machine, yet we remain ontologically detached from the virtual world it portrays. This, accordingly, creates a dual embodiment that includes literal embodiment as real-world users of hardware and software and virtual re-embodiment through our fictional roles as implied readers within the digital narrative. Digital fiction, therefore, immerses us in a cybernetic loop, where we both shape and are shaped by the narrative.

By engaging the audience in a dynamic exchange with the programmed narrative, interactive fiction fosters the sense of "being inside" a storyworld that unfolds through the reader's choices and interactions. Unlike traditional fiction, the experience is co-constructed in the sense that the text responds to input, making the reader an active participant in shaping the narrative. In "'Click = Kill': Textual You in Ludic Digital Fiction" (Bell & Ensslin 2012: 56 - 57), Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell elaborate on this type of interactive fiction as they state, "[i]nteractive fictions are the mode of digital fiction that employs the second person in perhaps the most explicit, most sustained way. Using present-tense verbs and imperatives, interactive fiction (IF) creates the illusion of being present in a storyworld that is constructed by the reader in creative interaction

with the programmed text”. In explaining how the reader/player is immersed in the digital fiction/game, Bell and Ensslin maintain that interactive fictions “use the second person to describe a fictional world in which the player is a character – the “you” of the narrative. The reader must enter text commands in response to fragments of text displayed on screen with the commands then generating more of the story” (Bell & Ensslin 2024: 2). This mode of narration of directly addressing the reader/player and of immersing him/her to belong to the fictional world are typical postmodern metafictional devices that shatter the illusion of the fictional reality, continuously directing the reader/viewer to generate more possible narratives that could be contradictory to each other. Readers/players must distinguish between the “referential you” that refers to an entity in the storyworld and the “address you” that refers to an entity outside the storyworld – the reader/player in this case.

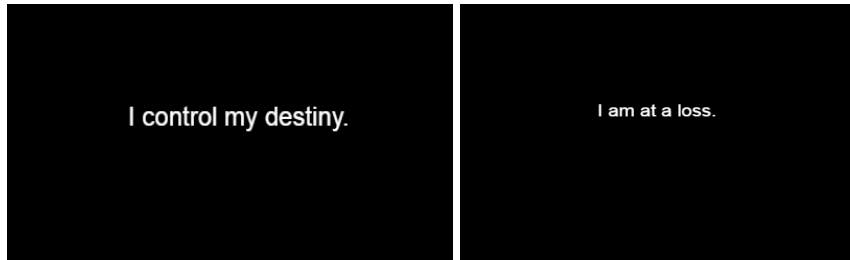
In the first scene of the digital poem/game, the reader/player advances in the story by rolling with the mouse over the sentence (tapping on it in the mobile app) displayed on the screen, thus allowing the next sentence to appear. With the sentence “Everything escapes me”, the mouse pointer disappears on the web and the touch of the screen no longer works, foreshadowing the impossibility of maintaining firm grasp. This beginning invites the reader/player to allude to the futility of trying to maintain control, and, in turn, the absurdity experienced by the characters in the fictional text as well as that of the reader/player. As the game continues, the reader/player continues rolling over each sentence attempting to display the following one, but the mouse pointer (the touch screen in the mobile app) does not help this time making the player start experiencing the loss of grasp through his/her gestures. In more than one scene, the user’s movement of the mouse causes sentences to drift away, rendering meaning literally out of reach. Bouchardon’s manipulation of interface elements (text, image, spatial orientation) stages the poem’s central epistemological crisis: that knowing, grasping, or mastering the self, or the poem, is always already deferred. Despite the futility of maintaining control, the reader/player has no option but following the instructions of the game in a desperate attempt to gain control. In *Loss of Grasp*, the instability of interface mirrors the instability of the self, and the user becomes a co-performer in this unraveling.

In examining how the reader/player processes this type of interactive fiction while playing, Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin argue in their article ““I know what it was. You know what it was”: Second-Person Narration in Hypertext Fiction” that in interactive fiction “anything that the interactor contributes, from a press of the space bar to a long typed text, is an input...an input that refers to an action in the IF world is a command [and] is usually in the form of an imperative and all other inputs, such as those that save, restore, quit, restart are directives” (Bell & Ensslin 2011: 317). This is the way the reader/player’s mind processes meaning throughout reading/playing. This is typical of what the reader/player experiences while reading/playing Bouchardon’s *Loss of Grasp*. In their *Reading Digital Fiction: Narrative, Cognition, Mediality* (2024: 1), Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin deeply explore digital fiction to which Serge Bouchardon’s *Loss of Grasp* belongs. Their argument emphasises the highly interactive nature of this digital poem/game as they state:

A reader of a hypertext fiction faces a two-dimensional, mostly text-based network of nodes, or text windows, which they navigate by clicking on hyperlinks. A radically different experience is offered by VR fiction, which immerses us in a fully rendered,

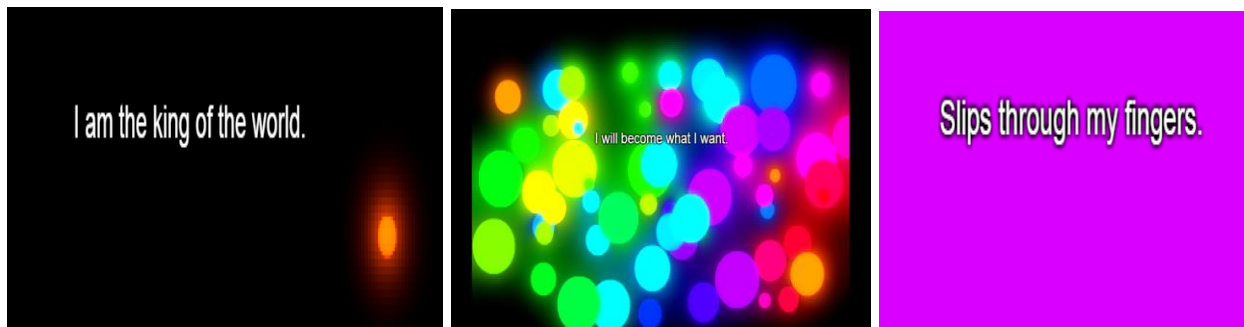
360-degree environment that is replete with multimodal information and multisensory stimuli that phenomenologically resemble our physical environments.

This multidimensional and multimodal medium of narrative adds richness to the examined discourse due to the coexistence of contradictions that, once disambiguated, reflects the absurdity and meaninglessness enveloping the humans' hazardous experiences in life. This could be illustrated when the speaker says, "I control my destiny" and is immediately followed by "I am at loss". The contradiction creates absurdity and meaninglessness, fostering the idea of losing grasp as seen in the following screenshots:



*Figure 1.3*

The black background intensifies the speaker's confusion and helplessness resulting from the coexistence of contradictions and the unknown. The idea of the futility to control is evident from the beginning of the poem/game. The same contradiction resulting from the illusion of control and the unfulfillment of this deepest desire is manifested at the very beginning of the poem/game as seen in the consequent screenshots below. However, the reader/player has no other option but to follow the instructions of the game:



*Figure 1.4*

Frequent contradiction manipulates the readers/players, who believe they are in full control till the very end despite the subtle and direct messages they receive that they have no control whatsoever. The sense of absurdity and meaninglessness grows more intense due to the unfulfilled wishes. Part of the contradiction created in the poem/game springs from its double interpretation or the undecidability of the text in deconstructionist terms. The reader can read the text either as a love poem or a breakup note. The reader can experience this double interpretation with gestures. If the reader moves the mouse cursor to the right, the text will unfold as a love poem. If the reader moves the cursor to the left, the order of the lines is reversed, and the text turns into a breakup



note. This results in creating multiple realities, none of which is certain and all of them are possible. This manipulation of narrative direction challenges the reader to engage actively with the text and reconsider their initial interpretations. This could portray the traditional progression of emotions, from initial affection to eventual disillusionment or a parting message that happens over time. As constituents of a larger story, they provide depth and complexity, inviting readers to piece together a holistic understanding from such fragmentation and non-linearity. Readers must navigate these layers, deciding which narrative threads to follow and how they interconnect. This interaction transforms the reader again from a passive consumer of text into an active participant in constructing meaning.

The narrative's fragmented and chaotic nature invites the reader to question traditional paradigms of coherence and meaning. This instability not only underscores the tenuous nature of narrative reliability but also serves as a metaphor for the inherent uncertainties in the reader's conceptual framework, prompting a re-evaluation of their interpretive assumptions, while trapping them in an endless loop. It is worth noting that this sense of uncertainty envelops the whole poem/game emphasizing the futility of human illusion to control their destiny. This sense of lack of control is experienced by the readers/players as well, as they stand clueless to the continuously changed texts that change meaning with a click of a mouse or a touch of the screen in the case of using the mobile app version. Accordingly, the readers/players identify with the main character's dilemma of loss and confusion, and the individual's experiences of absurdity and meaninglessness become universal as reflected in the scattered letters in the screenshots below:

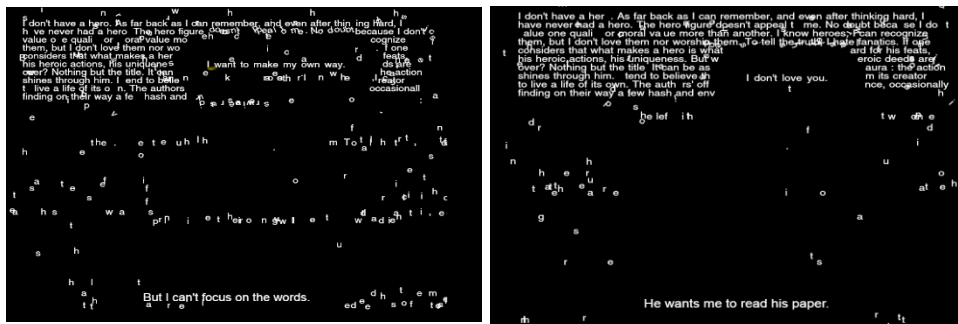


Figure 1.5

As a typical unconventional narrative, Bouchardon's *Loss of Grasp* utilizes non-linear and interactive techniques to delve into themes of time, existence, and absurdity. Bouchardon's *Loss of Grasp* manipulates traditional narrative structures to challenge and redefine the audience's perception of time and meaning. In this respect, the study of this highly interactive text provides insights into how these innovative narrative forms engage readers with complex philosophical questions and challenge traditional concepts of narrative time and human agency. Questioning the meaning of time in this digital poem/game is of primal importance especially that it celebrates the postmodern attitude of doubting the absolutes. This enables a further and deeper analyses of the meaning of all the passage of time in *Loss of Grasp* when the speaker/narrator says, for instance, "[t]wenty years have gone by since we met" (Bouchardon III). The manner in which time is manipulated in this poem/game, whether it is a consequence of an authorial conscious artistic choice or not, is indicative of its absurdity and meaninglessness. When the player/reader is given a choice in *Loss of Grasp* by being told: "Hello! If you want the meeting in ten years, press one,

in three hours, press two, now, press three” (Bouchardon I), whatever he/she presses, the meeting time arrives immediately as illustrated in figure 1.6 below:

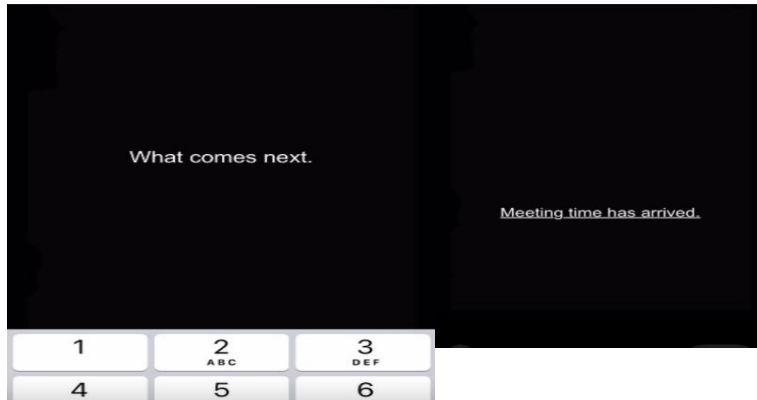


Figure 1.6

The figure above proves that there is no manifestation of absurdity more eloquent and profound than the absurdity of fictional time to the extent that it seems more absurd than physical time, and even more distinctive.

In *Loss of Grasp*, approximately ten minutes of reading and interacting with the text are needed to relate the events of a story that takes place over more than twenty years. Regardless of the audience’s interaction, the narrative accelerates twenty years in less than a second, right before the beginning of the third scene that would not be caught if he/she blinked in the wrong moment, while the screen simply reads, “Twenty years have gone by since we met” (Bouchardon III). Additionally, as previously mentioned, another episode of accelerated time of ten years would have emphasised the absurdity resulted from the discrepancy between story-time and discourse-time, had the interactor chosen to press one in order to have the meeting in 10 years. This literary work and its genre does not only accelerate towards its end, but it aggressively does so without a chance for the reader to catch breath or pause to contemplate as if it aspires to defying time or unravelling its ephemeral quality.

As far as circularity and multi-layered narratives are concerned, Figure 1.7 below comprises three screenshots that illustrate the unique temporal dynamics in Bouchardon's *Loss of Grasp*:

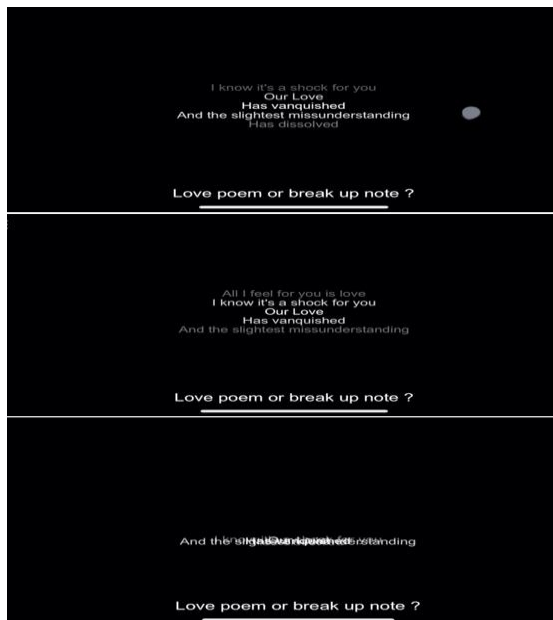


Figure 1.7

When the narrative is read by swiping up or down, it unfolds sequentially, with each line or verse appearing one after the other. This mimics a linear progression of time, where events and emotions are experienced in a specific order, much like how time is commonly perceived. The order of lines influences the narrative's interpretation. As mentioned before, swiping upwards might start with expressions of love, progressing towards disillusionment, whereas swiping downwards could begin with the dissolution of love, leading to a reflection on past affection. However, at a singular point, all lines are presented simultaneously, disregarding any temporal sequence. This convergence represents a moment where traditional linear time collapses, allowing all potential interpretations and emotional states to coexist. By presenting all verses together, the reader is challenged to consider the narrative as a whole, rather than as a linear progression which is naturally difficult to grasp. It encourages reflection on how individual moments and emotions interrelate beyond temporal restrictions, rendering them unidentifiable sometimes or even absurd. This moment invites multiple interpretations, including the absurdity of temporality and the insignificance of time in absurd narratives.

In *Loss of Grasp*, the narrative structure is distinctly non-repetitive. This absence of repetition can be precisely described using Gerard Genette's concept of singulative narrative. In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method* (1980), he expounds on the concept of narrative frequency, particularly the distinctions between singulative and iterative narratives that explore the relationship between how often an event occurs in the story and how often it is narrated. According to Genette, singulative narrative refers to narrating an event exactly as many times as it happens, maintaining a one-to-one correspondence between the event and its recounting. Iterative narrative, on the other hand, involves recounting a recurring event just once, summarising

multiple similar occurrences into a single narrative instance (Genette 1980: 113 – 127). This narrative technique, although common in literature, serves different functions depending on its use, such as creating a sense of routine or habit, or providing a broader commentary on time and experience. This concept of singulative narrative is particularly useful in understanding *Loss of Grasp*, where the singularity of events underscores the finality and irreversibility of each action. However, there are some exceptions to this, where the embedded narratives create a loop that disrupts the forward-moving inevitability characterising the broader structure of *Loss of Grasp* which can be illusively linear. One example of this embedded narrative is illustrated in the son's essay on the theme of the hero, which is continuously interrupted and changed by the clicks of the player to create more frames of narratives.

Unlike the singular, irreversible events of the main narrative, the embedded text embodies a form of narrative recursion, where the same words can be experienced in reverse, effectively negating the so called 'linear' flow and suggesting an endless loop. This circularity within the framed narrative complicates the overall narrative strategy of *Loss of Grasp*, introducing a paradox where the main narrative's progression towards an inevitable conclusion is momentarily suspended by the embedded text's potential for infinite repetition. This loop reflects a different temporal and narrative logic, one that contrasts with and, in some ways, subverts the singulative narrative of the broader work. This is also illustrated in Scene V where a suggested narrative frame is created by allowing the webcam where the image of the player appears on the screen and the narrator confesses in a highly interactive part, "I feel manipulated" and "It fails me" as illustrated below in figure 1.8:

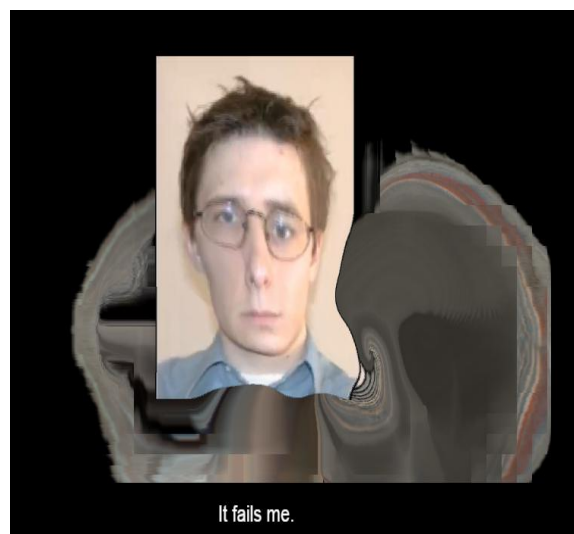


Figure 1.8

In this scene, the reader/player becomes part of the embedded fictional narrative once he/she opens the webcam.

In this study, *Loss of Grasp* is explored as a digital narrative that constructs an illusion of agency and control, only to subvert it through pre-determined outcomes. The interactive nature of the work is compared to the concept of divine omniscience and predestination, where human

actions are perceived as operating within the confines of a higher, omnipotent force. In *Boundaries of Narrative*, Gérard Genette's critical framework, particularly his distinction between description and narration, provides a robust tool for analysing the structural dynamics of literary texts, especially in the context of time manipulation. This distinction is crucial for understanding how unconventional narratives like *Loss of Grasp* channels knowledge and engages with existential and absurdist themes. Genette proposes that narration involves the representation of events in a temporal sequence, emphasising actions and their progression over time, creating a sense of movement and development within the story. Narration is primarily concerned with the "what happens" aspect of a text, driving the plot forward and often reflecting the temporal and causal relationships between events. Description, on the other hand, focuses on the representation of objects, settings, and characters in a spatial dimension, often pausing the flow of events to provide a more immersive and vivid picture of the narrative world. Despite their distinct functions, narration and description are deeply interdependent, with description often serving as an ancillary to narration by providing the necessary context and background that support the unfolding of events (Genette 1976: 5-8). However, in unconventional narratives like *Loss of Grasp*, the relationship between description and narration becomes more complex and subversive. This type of texts challenges the traditional hierarchy and interdependence of narration and description, using them in innovative ways to reflect the fluidity of time and the absurdity of human existence, and similarly creating a fictional world that sometimes abide by the laws of storyworld, while defying them in other occasions, thereby deepening their engagement with existential themes.

In *Loss of Grasp*, the interactor's journey echoes existential inquiries about human existence, purpose, and the divine. The verses displayed, such as "[f]or some time now, I expect but one thing: what comes next", (Bouchardon I) invoke a sense of surrender to a higher power. This sentiment is similar to existentialist reflections on the human condition in the face of a divine plan. The narrative's insistence on participation despite its futility can be seen as a commentary on faith and the human need to seek meaning within a divinely ordered, yet incomprehensible, reality. The abrupt acceleration of time in the narrative can be seen as a metaphor for divine intervention. It emphasises the limited control the interactor has over the passage of time.

The narrative of *Loss of Grasp* is constructed in a way that the interactor feels an illusion of control, which is continually subverted. Whatever choices the audience makes, unless they coincidentally abide by the scripted progression of the story, are futile. For instance, the first scene starts with a message addressing the interactor that says, "Welcome. Press the hash key" as illustrated in Figure 1.8 (Bouchardon I). If he/she resists by pressing three instead, it progresses to the next part regardless. The unusual arrangement of the star (\*), hash (#), and plus (+) keys on the same button in the keypad interface is more than just a design; it serves as a subtle manifestation of the work's overarching theme of absurdity.

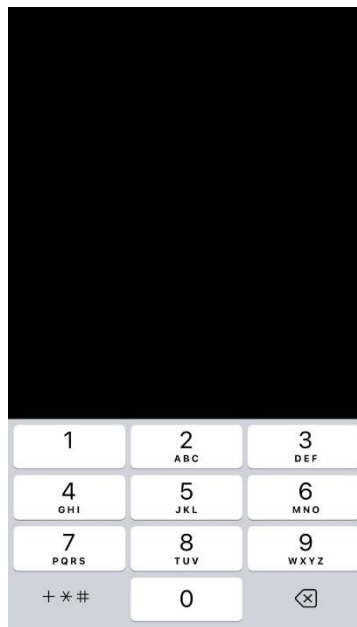


Figure 1.9

This deviation in the interface not only unsettles the user's expectations but also functions as an implicit commentary on the illusory nature of choice within the narrative. The interface itself seems to mock the user's agency. The placement of these three symbols on the same key symbolises the futility of decision-making in a world where the outcome is preordained and where making choice is just an illusion.

Through the investigation of *Loss of Grasp*, an input window has been discovered in the IOS version as well as the web version of the work that enables the user to overcome the control loop in the sixth scene (Bouchardon VI). This input window allows the user to choose the words suggested by the keypad instead of uselessly tapping on the letters. Similarly, in the web version, it is possible to completely distort the pre-determined message by copying any external text and pasting it in the box where a message appears. By selecting the suggested words or choosing any external text to copy to the screen, the audience can bypass the restrictive narrative control, thereby momentarily regaining a sense of agency within the interactive experience. The discovery of this input window highlights the inherent limitations and vulnerabilities in digital narratives. It suggests that while the narrative strives to maintain control and direct the user's experience, unforeseen elements can disrupt this control. The audience's ability to find and exploit such input windows can be seen as a form of resistance against the narrative's imposed limitations, emphasising the fluid and dynamic relationship between the narrative and its audience. Regardless of whether the input window itself can be interpreted as a deliberate narrative device employed by Bouchardon or not, it enhances the interactive experience by introducing an element of unpredictability and discovery, and it channels knowledge that contests, even if temporarily, the pervasive voice of dominance. The reader/player is again facing manipulation based on a difference between his/her expectations and the display on the screen as reflected in figure 1.10 below:

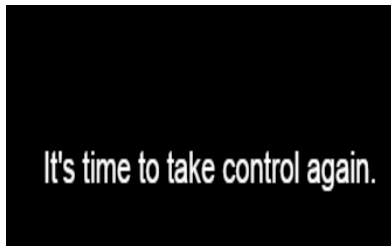


Figure 1.10

Ironically, whatever the player types, the interface only shows the pre-determined message, proving the entire loss of grasp for both characters and players.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Serge Bouchardon's *Loss of Grasp* transcends traditional poetic forms by immersing the reader in a dynamic interplay of control and disorientation. Through its six interactive scenes, the poem dismantles the illusion of user agency, compelling readers to confront the instability of perception and the fragility of self-narrative. The work's innovative use of interactive elements - such as disappearing text, responsive visuals, and user-manipulated inputs - serves not merely as aesthetic choices but as integral components that mirror the protagonist's psychological unraveling. This digital poem exemplifies how electronic literature can engage readers in a multisensory experience that challenges their expectations and compels them to question the very act of interpretation. By integrating motion, sound, and user interaction, *Loss of Grasp* creates a space where meaning is not fixed but constantly shifting, reflecting the complexities of human cognition and emotion. The poem's design ensures that each reader's journey is unique, emphasizing the subjective nature of understanding and the elusive pursuit of control. In *Loss of Grasp*, the reader's anticipation is played upon, manipulated, and ultimately unfulfilled, creating a shared experience of disorientation and questioning. The undecidability of meaning lies at the heart of Bouchardon's *Loss of Grasp*. In this digital poem/game, the instability of meaning and the fluidity of narrative form demand an active, almost collaborative role from the reader. Thus, *Loss of Grasp* does not merely echo the themes of absurdity and unpredictability; it extends and deepens them, particularly through its complex treatment of time. In these narratives, time itself becomes a tool for expressing the futility and uncertainty of existence, where the only certainty is uncertainty, and where the search for meaning is both the journey and the destination.

This narrative channels a profound exploration of the unity of existence and being, challenging conventional structures and expectations. This unity may imply a singular truth or knowledge, open to multiple interpretations, pointing toward the existence of God as the only true reality, with all else being mere illusion or reflection. Alternatively, it may suggest the absence of God, leading to a nihilistic or absurdist interpretation where reality itself is reduced to mere reflections of an unknowable source. Thus, the difficulty in pinpointing the user's constantly changing narrative role underscores the narrative's engagement with the fundamental uncertainties of existence, compelling the reader to contemplate the nature of reality, existence, and the possible presence or absence of a higher power. Despite the appearance of choice, the narrative's

progression is fixed, symbolising the theological doctrine that human freedom operates within the parameters set by a higher superior authority. This aligns with the concept of divine omniscience and predestination, where every action and its outcome are foreknown and orchestrated by a higher power.



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