Queensland University of Technology

Jarryd Luke

Sim-therapy

Biographical note:

Jarryd Luke has a PhD in creative writing from the Queensland University of Technology. In 2011, he was shortlisted in the State Library of Queensland Young Writers Award and the QUT Postgraduate Writing Prize. His manuscript 'Corkscrew section' was shortlisted in the Emerging Author category of the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards. His work been published in *The Lifted Brow*, *M/C Journal, LiNQ* and *Rex*. Jarryd is the Director of the Townsville Writers and Publishers Centre.

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It will be all right ...
> \- Maurice, *For the Term of his Natural Life*, 138

It will be all right ...
> \- Marilla, *Anne of Green Gables*, 122

It will be all right ...
> \- Richard, *Bleak House*, 228

It will be all right ...
> \- Mrs Assingham, *The Golden Bowl*, 99

God will send the dawn and we shall be all right.
> \- the Squire of the Grove, *Don Quixote*, 497

Anne: He pulled me out of his car and took me around the side of his house to the backyard and there was this huge shed attached to the back of the garage, and he dragged me inside and showed me how he'd made this trapdoor under a tool bench. Like they said on the news, the door was this slab of concrete reinforced with steel. He typed a code into a little box on the wall and the door slid open, and he told me he'd rigged the door so if I messed with it it'd explode.

Dr Muir: What did it look like inside?

Anne: The room was only a couple metres long and a bit under two high. I used to have nightmares where I got taller and had to crouch the whole time, but of course I hardly grew while I was down there. Like ten centimetres maybe.

Dr Muir: What happened on the first day?

Anne: He'd left this pile of books and toys on the mattress and at first I couldn't even look at them. But every few weeks he brought me more books because he could tell I loved reading, and I kept them in stacks in the corner opposite my bed, and I had four stacks by the end, all the way up to the ceiling.

Dr Muir: What were your favourite books?

Anne: I loved Charles Dickens and Henry James. And then I had lots of trashy stuff like Mary Stewart and Georgette Heyer. I read each book at least ten times. I started underlining phrases, ones that echoed the things I was saying to myself, like 'I want to go home' or 'It will be all right.'

I stay back at the office, listening to the interview with Anne (pseudonym) for the umpteenth time. Anderson asked me to put the finishing touches on Dr Muir's dungeon simulation, which is based on a tunnel we created a few months ago for the trapped miners in Bolivia. As always, Anderson's obsessed with the tiniest details: the titles, authors and publication dates of the books; the number of rungs on the ladder.

Claire, my ex, is the beta tester. She walks back and forth through our sims for a living: wall hugging, searching for inconsistencies, errors, glitches.

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We were together for six years. A few months ago, she kind of burned out and decided she needed some time on her own. When we moved out of our apartment I realised I wasn't as independent as I'd thought. Claire always had more friends than me, and my family's interstate, so I didn't have anyone I could stay with while I sorted things out.

Now the sim's finished, I'll send it to Claire for testing. It's weird having her check my sims, but we've always worked in the same industry and helped with each other's projects. At least she's in a different building.

Claire'll spend the next week immersed in the sim, repeating the situations in Anne's Anxiety Hierarchy:

Climbing down the ladder into the dungeon.

Waiting with the lights off for a week, as punishment for dirtying the room, using too much water, or refusing to play cards with her kidnapper.
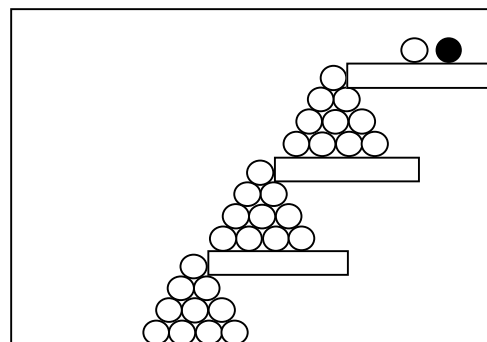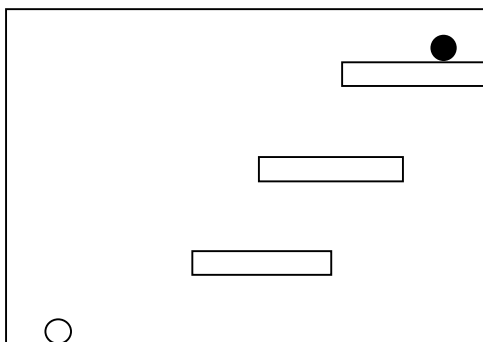
Sitting in the corner sharing a Curly Wurly with him as he describes his own traumatic childhood.

Teasing him about a John Coltrane record, which he plays on a gramophone he bought for her at a garage sale at the neighbours' house. (Cowering on the mattress while he shouts at her and tries to burn her wrist with a cigarette lighter, but his hands shake and he can't get it to light and he apologises and promises to bring her something other than jazz.)

Standing in the backyard for the first time after he decides to let her help him weed on Sundays, surrounded on all sides by a high fence, which he tells her is electric.

Fleeing through the house two months later after a rock flung by the lawnmower hits his foot.

My job's not easy. Lately I've been getting dizzy spells that brown out my hearing and vision, leaving me with nothing to focus on for a few seconds but a bland disgust for the way I operate. But still, I'm glad I'm not a beta tester.

At home I'm trying to finish a puzzle game, one of the projects Claire and I used to work on together. It's about a spherical amoeba who overcomes obstacles by cloning himself. His goal is to reach his sweetheart (also an amoeba), who's been kidnapped by a malignant bacteria. It was Claire's idea. I pointed out that amoebas are asexual,

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but she said that was part of the charm. I know I'll probably never finish the game, but it makes a nice change from all the horror stories I recreate at work.

Today I come up with a level where the amoeba creates piles of clones and climbs up them to reach his girlfriend.

At ten o'clock, Anderson introduces me to the new programmer, Stephanie, and asks me to show her the ropes. She's in the cubicle next to mine. The old programmer, Frank, left a few days ago after setting up a 'nerd culture' novelty store with his brother-in-law. I show Stephanie his goodbye present – an ant farm that's painted like a Lemmings level, with ants running back and forth instead of the lemmings.

She says it seems like a radical career change and I tell her how Frank used to get anxiety attacks from constructing disasters all day long. Over the last year my own nerves have deteriorated into a sort of Fox News of alternating hysteria and dread.

It makes it easier if you pretend you're coding games. Some of our sims are actually based on big titles. We made an office shooting sim last year that borrowed graphics and code from a first-person shooter called *Street Soldier*.

To show Steph how things work, I load a plane crash sim I need to redo for one of Frank's old clients. I warn Steph to be wary around Anderson while we're working on it. His wife died on a flight to Montreal a few years ago; that's the reason he got into the business.

'We specialise in non-military scenarios,' I tell Steph. 'Car crashes, volcanos, floods. It's a competitive field. Therapeutic sims were first developed for Vietnam War veterans, and the US army is working on similar software for Iraq. Anderson loves details. That's what makes Sim-Therapy unique. We create personalised, ultra-realistic simulations.'

Details are important. Our clients have PTSD, and our sims are a form of exposure therapy; e.g. you take someone with, say, arachnophobia, and show them a spider. You gradually increase the time they're exposed to the spider, and then maybe get them to approach it, or hold it in their hand. By exposing them to the source of their fear while they're in a safe environment, you can help them control their anxiety.

I give Steph the helmet and gloves so she can look around the plane.

'Last year we made a sim for a very similar crash: same type of plane, different airline.'

Steph flicks through the in-flight magazine with her gloved hands.

'So Anderson wants us to make a list of everything the art department – Ted and Joan over there – has to make so the plane looks like it belongs to a different airline. It's all about recreating the scene where the traumatic event took place. The user has to believe they're back there.'

We make a list: the background music during take-off; the name of the airline in the safety demonstrations and captain's announcements; the patterns on the seats; the dates on the complimentary newspapers; the airline logos on those little plastic bags

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they give you the headphones in; the food (lunch and dinner); the in-flight entertainment.

Steph points out all these things I overlook, like the airline logo on the gate, which is just visible through the windows. She's good.

I'm giving the sim a final look-over when I hear Anderson walking towards me.

I reach for the helmet but he says, 'Leave it on.'

So I sit there with the helmet on and listen to Anderson type something into my computer. Steph went to the bathroom a couple of minutes ago and even though I can't see, I'm pretty sure she's not back yet.

The sim shifts and I find myself in a shopping mall.

'Look familiar?' says Anderson.

I nod.

'Remind me what this sim was for.'

'We made it after a kid got his sandal caught in an escalator,' I say. 'The escalator jerked to a halt, and this old man who was halfway up the escalator with his wife fell over and bumped his head. He went into a coma or something.'

I walk towards the escalator. I know something's wrong here, but I can't quite put my finger on it. It's in the details. Something's wrong with the details. I pray that Steph won't come back yet.

Anderson plays the incident. The man's head smacks into one of the steps and his groceries tumble down towards me.

'Do you remember how the boy managed to get his sandal jammed between the steps?'

'There was a similar accident the previous year. Little girl got her shoelace caught in the same escalator. So they painted yellow lines on every step, so people wouldn't put their feet near the edges.'

'But?'

I hear his feet shift on the carpet.

'But, um, a couple of days before the sandal incident, the up escalator stopped working. So, in the meantime, the management decided to, uh, reverse the direction of the other escalator, so it was going up instead of down. It was easier that way, for the customers.'

'And …'

I realise where he's going with this.

'In front of every yellow line they'd also painted a message saying *Do not step on the yellow line.*'

'Uh huh.'

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'But because the escalator was now going up, instead of down, the message was facing away from the customers, instead of towards them.'

I look at the warnings on the escalator steps in front of me. The words are the right way up.

'So when you made this sim,' Anderson says, 'you were extra careful to print the words *upside-down*, just like in real life, weren't you? Because you knew how important it was to the victims. Because you knew the old man's wife sued the shopping mall because the little boy *couldn't read the safety message.*'

I'm disoriented. I can't work out where Anderson is. A little part of my brain keeps telling me he's going to hit me. He's not normally this bad. It's the plane crash. He can't handle it.
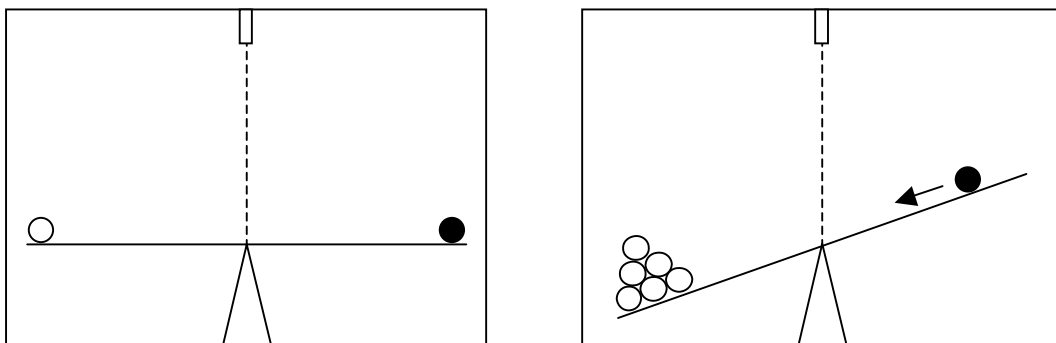
'Do you have any idea what our clients would say if they saw this? What if the boy's therapist calls me up and tells me my sim has caused her client all manner of mental anguish by implying he was responsible for the whole fucking mess?'

It takes me a minute to realise he's stormed off. I take the helmet off and look around. Steph is walking over, smiling.

'How's it coming along?' she asks.

I try to breathe normally.

'Good.'

At home I sit on the balcony and design another level for the puzzle game, where the amoebas are on opposite ends of a seesaw. In the middle of the seesaw is a laser powerful enough to kill the male amoeba but not the female amoeba, who is more highly evolved (Claire's suggestion). The male amoeba solves the problem by cloning himself so the seesaw tips and the female amoeba rolls towards him.

The next day Steph and I start working on the next stage of the kidnapping sim for Dr Muir. Now that I've finished the dungeon we have to design the kidnapper's house so Anne can relive her sprint through the rooms and out the front door. I focus on the living room while Steph plans out the hallway and kitchen.
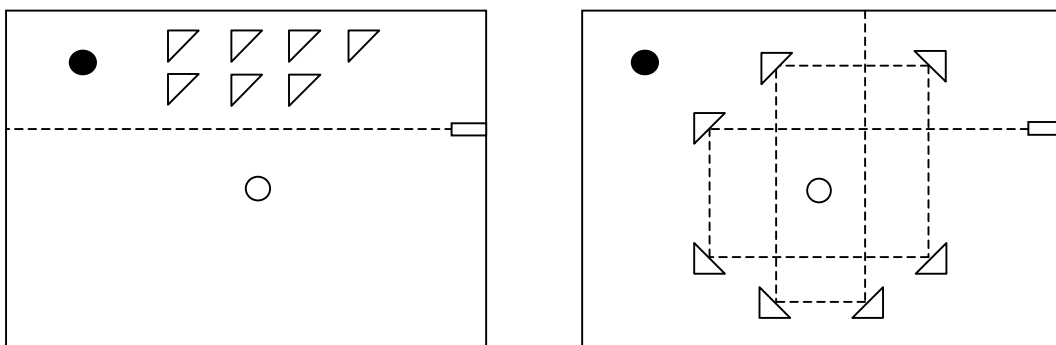
After lunch Anderson comes round to check on our progress. I've been dreading this, but thankfully he doesn't mention the escalator thing. Although for some reason he gets worked up about a grandfather clock in the living room, which I didn't plan to

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animate, but apparently needs to be functioning if we're going to have any chance at verisimilitude.

So I spend the afternoon programming the stupid pendulum.

Steph and I chat in my cubicle for a while and somehow we get onto the topic of what animals would look like if they evolved to survive in a manmade world; e.g. big cats camouflaged to resemble concrete or stainless steel; trees twisted into the shape of traffic lights; meerkats with Geiger counters; insects that subsist solely on artificial colours and flavours.

At five, Anderson tells me off about the grandfather clock again; now he wants the hands on the face to move around in time with the pendulum. This is getting ridiculous.
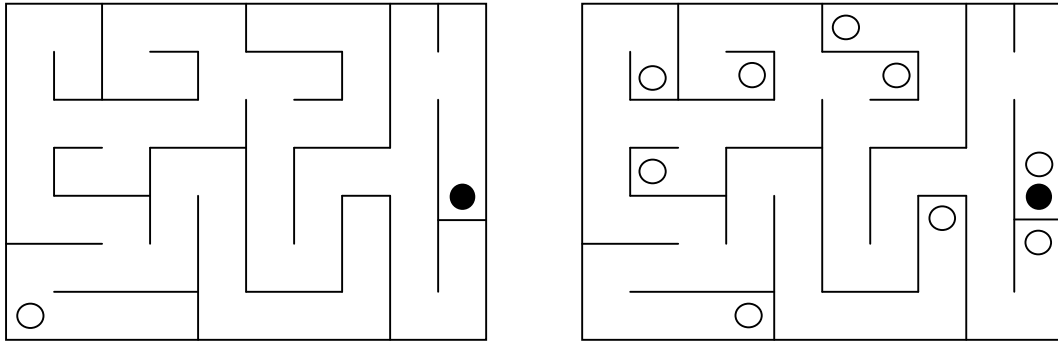
I have this dream where the female amoeba moves a bunch of angled mirrors in order to trap the male amoeba within a series of intersecting lasers. It sounds lame but it freaks me out.

I feel like Steph and I had a moment this morning. I went to get a Gatorade from the drinks machine and Steph was banging it because she'd bought a Dr Pepper but it got caught on the hook and was teetering on the edge of the shelf. I pretended I wanted a Diet Coke because it was three rows above the Dr Pepper. When I pressed the button the Diet Coke hit the Dr Pepper on its way down, knocking it loose, and both drinks banged into the tray at the bottom. We laughed and bumped fists, like we'd pulled off some elaborate billiards trick.

I happily play back this moment in my head for twenty minutes until Anderson comes round again and gives me an earful because I haven't taken into account the fact that the 'incident' occurred at the height of summer, which means the grandfather clock's pendulum, which was made of brass, would have expanded, thus becoming longer, thus increasing the diameter of its swing, thus slowing down the time displayed on the clock face.

I could point out that Anderson's demands are becoming flagrantly absurd and his judgement is clearly being clouded by his own traumatic past, but I keep my mouth shut and do the calculations because I don't really have a leg to stand on after the escalator incident.

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Anderson stays in his office all day and the receptionist (his daughter, Rose) doesn't even come around at morning teatime to offer us coffee.

Came up with another level. The male amoeba needs to reach the female amoeba as quickly as possible. He doesn't have time to explore every branch of the maze, so he clones himself at every intersection. That way, he can cover all his bases and make sure at least one of him gets to the female amoeba in time.

When I finish the level, all those clones caught in dead-ends remind me of how clients often say they feel disembodied during traumatic situations – they become separated from themselves and what's happening to them. Sometimes they can't remember anything, and it only starts coming back to them later, in dreams and flashbacks, repeating itself. Part of them always stays back there.

You have to move outside yourself to survive. But you leave pieces behind.

I stay back late again, putting the finishing touches on the living room. Steph ducks out to get us coffee.

I don my helmet and stand in front of the clock, watching the pendulum swing back and forth inside the glass. I imagine Claire standing in the same place, walking past the clock over and over, from every possible angle, and something occurs to me.

I pull up an old picture of us in a bed and breakfast in Amsterdam, sitting on the couch with our faces flushed from a storm outside.

This isn't a cry for help. I'm not trying to get back with her. It's just that for a long time I haven't been as calm as I was then and I want to acknowledge that.

So I insert the image into the sim, into the glass in front of the pendulum. I make the picture look like a reflection in the glass, as if the grandfather clock is actually in the corner of the darkened room in Europe. I program the reflection so the user can only see it if they stare at the clock from a certain angle. The reflection is so faint you can still see the pendulum, swinging back and forth between us.

Then I send the sim off for beta testing.

I stare at my hands in front of the keyboard for a while and get up to stretch. When I'm on my feet a dizzy spell hits me and I nearly fall over. My ears start ringing and I lose my balance.

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The truth is I have a diffuse unsafe feeling almost all the time now and I don't know where it comes from.

I hold a hand out but I can't find the wall of my cubicle. My eyes are still sorting their way through a lot of fake light when I feel Steph put a hand on my shoulder.

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Research Statement

Research background

Desktop publishing has encouraged many contemporary writers to experiment with the visual presentation of their work, using photographs, sketches, typography, white space and found documents to reinforce and invigorate their fiction (Gutjahr & Benton 2001: 14). Researchers have shown that these graphic devices, which are traditionally absent from literature, are not just superficial; they play a complex and integral role in the creation of meaning, such as morphing to reflect the action, suggesting connections between disparate elements, or highlighting aspects of the characters' inner lives (Sadokierski 2010; White 2005; Schiff 1998).

Research contribution

In 'Sim-therapy' I used digital tools to create diagrams spread throughout the story, as well as an unusual epigraph, which repeats the same quote from five different authors. These quotes would have been all but impossible to find without running searches through digital texts. This method of collating the epigraphs ties in with the story's exploration of how digital technology influences the way we receive and interpret information. The layout of the story is also governed by this theme: the extremely short paragraphs and the insertion of material such as screen shots and recorded interviews indicate technology's effect on the main character's thought patterns and way of life.

Research significance

'Sim-therapy' maintains a careful balance between visual experimentation and traditional storytelling. It creates complex narrative and thematic connections between words and images, producing new associations for the reader to explore, but without disrupting the reading experience or disorienting the reader by presenting them with jarring or overly complex visuals.

Works Cited

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