

Navigation, Investigation, and Inference: Donna Leishman's *Deviant: The Possession of Christian Shaw*

Talan Memmott

Originally published in The Iowa Review

A haunting overture plays as we enter a cartoon cityscape. Four tall buildings, a church, some trees.... Seems peaceful enough.... What happens next? Such is the case when one first encounters Donna Leishman's *Deviant: The Possession of Christian Shaw*—a work of narrative hypermedia that plays with expectations of both narrative and hypermedia.

The initial screen does not present the user with any obvious links or areas of interaction, but what one soon discovers is that there are links hidden everywhere in the cityscape; you just have to find them. This investigation of the interface seems an important part of the narrative strategy in the work, as will be discussed below.

Deviant: The Possession of Christian Shaw is developed in Macromedia [now Adobe] Flash and was produced as part of Leishman's doctoral thesis. The piece is a retelling of a bit of 17th-century Scottish history. I don't want to give away the base narrative here, because in many ways this would destroy how the work operates, how the narrative unfolds through interactive participation with it. Let's just say the story, as indicated in the title, has something to do with a questionable possession, accusations of witchcraft, and the ramifications of these accusations.

The design of the work is crisp and simple in most regards, and the characters of the story are rendered in a sort of alternative comic style. They are highly stylized. The Christian Shaw character is actually quite endearing with her over-sized head, sad expression, and big eyes.

Based on my understanding of the Christian Shaw story, this is something of a sucker punch. The cuteness of the Christian Shaw character builds empathy in defiance of the captivating yet perverse nature of the original story.

The supporting documents of Leishman's thesis—titled *Creating Screen-Based Multiple State Environments: Investigating Systems of Confutation*—explain in detail many of the aesthetic, poetic, and narrative choices in the work. Even the title of the thesis gives some hint as to what is going on here. To confute is to decisively prove something incorrect. An earlier, now obsolete, definition of the term is to confound. Both of these definitions are very much at play in *Deviant*. In its retelling of the story, the work questions certain historical facts and, in terms of narrativity, operates in a way that some may find confounding.

From the initial screen—the cityscape—the user, though the author/artist prefers to call the user a participant, is provided access to additional panels. These secondary panels are where the narrative occurs, through animated vignettes that at times can be rather cryptic.

There is very little text in the piece, with most of the interactive and narrative cues occurring visually. These vignettes are pieces of a story, of a puzzle to be realigned, reconfigured by the engaged participant. As such *Deviant* is not so much a retelling of the Christian Shaw story as an opening-up of the base narrative. From what is implied in the original story, the author/artist has made inferences and made vignettes of these inferences. It is the job of the participant to take what is now implied in the vignettes and draw their own inferences from this. The process is quite cunning as the narrative is now twice removed from its source, rendered almost irrelevant to the participant. Without some prior knowledge of the Christian Shaw story, it would be difficult to place the narrative generated through interaction with the piece as a 17th-century factually-based Scottish tale. The characters are not costumed in this period, and certainly the architecture of the cityscape is anachronistic. There is a continuation

of inferability without referability back to the base narrative. In this regard the user is a participant in the narrative construction of the piece and is not so much asked to read the vignettes as write out of them.

There are a couple of terms introduced in the supporting thesis that I think deserve mentioning, as they directly relate to the author/artist's narrative intentions. In the thesis Leishman uses the term *digressive spaces* to describe the vignettes that are accessed from the central cityscape.

In *Deviant* this term is realized in a number of ways. First, some of the vignettes include rather detailed animations that are not necessarily additive in terms of narrative. In one vignette we are treated to falling flower petals when we move the cursor over the flower graphics. In another, the leaves of a tree change colors upon mouseover allowing the participant to construct patterns in the foliage. Neither of these examples adds much to the narrative; rather, they are momentary digressions, reprieves from the narrative that could be considered bits of visual poetry. On more than one occasion I caught myself dwelling on the construction of patterns in the tree foliage. The term *digressive spaces* could be employed in another area of the work. The piece is nonlinear and variable, though it does possess an explanatory epilogue of sorts. After repeated visits to the work, I found myself interested in certain vignettes, learning the navigational patterns it takes to reveal them. This feature in itself is digressive, in that it works somewhat against the generation of a consistent and cohesive narrative for the work.

Certainly, within literary hypermedia, variability is a key consideration, but with *Deviant* the variability is somewhat controllable if patterns of interactivity are learned by the participant. This sort of play with the interface adds another layer of complexity to the whole as it introduces an aspect of gaming into the overall piece.

This playful aspect is reinforced by the method of navigation one vignette to another. When a vignette has been closed the participant is returned to the cityscape, but the cityscape has been transformed. Something has changed. In most cases tiny navigation points are added to the cityscape providing access to additional vignettes, though it may take a moment to find these. This sort of "Where's Waldo?" metaphor—the tiny navigation points that require investigation of the interface to be discovered—leads to the second term from the thesis that I would like to mention, *atmospheric accumulation*. I think this term applies to both the cityscape interface and the *digressive* (though narrative) *spaces* of the vignettes.

As stated above *Deviant* seems less about readability than inferability. The participant is just that—a participant in the narrativity, or narra[c]tivity of the work. The interface and its navigational cues perform and require a sort of environmental grammatology. We construct a story, our own story out of the fragments of the world we are presented with. In this regard, *Deviant* is an open narrative structure that is not burdened with expectations of clarity or understanding of writerly intent. These are things left to the participant.

I would urge any user/participant to explore the piece: invent and enjoy before doing any research into the story of Christian Shaw. If you happen to come to the epilogue during your first exploration of the piece, ignore it and go through the piece one more time. Certainly, at some point, it is a good idea to read the epilogue to come to some understanding of the base narrative, but part of the joy of Leishman's *Deviant* is in the potential deviations from the original story.