

Jill Walker; Jan Van Looy

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Comments on Van Looy's review of *We descend*

By Jill Walker and Jan Van Looy

Nr. 21 – 2002

Jill Walker, January 2, 2002

reviewing: support or slaughter

I suspect Dichtung Digital thinks most reviews of hypertext fiction have been too kind, toothless and uncritical. This may be true. Dichtung Digital's reviews tend towards the opposite extreme, as in Jan van Looy's review of Bill Bly's *We Descend*. I haven't read *We Descend*, so the following is not a comment on the qualities or lack thereof of Bly's work, but on the way in which van Looy's review is written.

I find reviews useful when they tell me some of the good as well as some of the bad. When I read a review I want to be told what the goal of the project (story, art, whatever) is, in the reviewer's opinion, and whether the reviewer thinks that goal was achieved. I want to see the work reviewed placed in some sort of context. And most importantly, a review should take a work seriously and consider it on its own terms. That doesn't mean not being critical. I'm happy for a reviewer to decide that the work's premisses are flawed or that it doesn't fulfil what it's trying to do or that it's bad for many other reasons.

Sometimes reviewing is exhausting, and sometimes it's very tempting to slaughter a piece, to ridicule it, as van Looy has done. The review is introduced by the editors with these words:

Is Jan van Looy's paper "23 reasons not to read *We Descend*" really equipped to make him any friends in the hypertext department? It all depends on how much sense for criticism (and humor) there has developed yet...

Well. While it would be tragic if "the hypertext department" (whatever that is) were unable to accept dissention I'd rather see a serious review that deals properly with the text it's reviewing than a review like this - ridicule is not my favourite kind of humour. Here's one of the 23 reasons not to read it, for instance (and admittedly, many of the other reasons are much stronger):

08. It is barely longer than a novella

"The text runs to some 40,000 words, contained in 598 nodes connected in various ways by 864 links" (directions for reading *We Descend*). The Storyspace version is contained on one 1.44mb disc. When I export the hypertext to html, it becomes 2.69mb in 635 items. It contains the string bore(d)/boring 12 times. Long live electronic text. "23 reasons..." part 2

How can the length of a text, in itself, be a criteria for judging its value? Van Looy demonstrates here that he's more interested in showing off than in taking the work for what it is.

It could be seen as a sign that hypertext fiction has matured when it is reviewed by people who aren't so close to the writers that they can only be positive, or by people who hate the idea of electronic fiction by default. Perhaps a few extreme reviews like this are just a phase before we can find a balanced, thoughtful, constructive and critical way of discussing electronic literature.

Jan Van Looy, January 11, 2002

Hard words break no bones

I would like to start my comment on Jill Walker's reaction with a preliminary note concerning the genesis of the review in question. Whether the people from Dichtung Digital think that reviews have been toothless and uncritical, I am not entitled to say, because I do not know. However, I can say that their opinion has never played any role in this review. In fact, it was written for another magazine, which I will refrain from mentioning here. The latter turned the review down, not because the criticism was impertinent or the style too radical, but because it attacked the wrong work. This is one comment I got from the editorial board: "What you say against bly and eastgate seems about right - but then the problem arises as to why [the magazine] should go out of its way to pan a book that's so patently mediocre and that hasn't been much noticed in any event." I would like to thank Dichtung Digital for having published this article, by which they have taken a considerable risk.

In the second paragraph of her reaction, Jill Walker describes what she considers a useful review. She would like to know the positive and the negative, the goal of a project, in short: its context. This is a viewpoint which, although I do endorse it, is problematic in the present case. While I was studying *We Descend* a few months ago, I came to realise that it was not really worth reviewing. I looked at my pile of notes and decided to try something else. *We Descend* fails in many respects. In fact, it fails in so many respects that we could learn something of it. If I could identify and describe the different problems the work faces, this could be an interesting lesson

for anyone attempting to create new media fiction. In order to do this, however, I needed a radical format and to keep it all readable I needed a grotesque and radical authorial voice. Please do not confuse this voice with my own. It simply felt like the most appropriate way of presenting the analysis.

"How can the length of a text, in itself, be a criterion for judging its value?" (Walker's reaction, paragraph 7). It cannot of course. The context provided by the other "reasons" should make up for this however. The review's fragmented, decentred format is an invitation for the reader to recombine the bits and pieces of reasoning and could be seen as a covert allusion to the "genre" in question, i.e. hypertext. If you combine the fact that *We Descend* is a linear short story on a disc with what it costs, then you get an interesting point and unavoidably a value judgement.

One remark in Walker's reaction (last paragraph) I do dislike, because if it is true that my review appears to be written by someone who hates the idea of electronic fiction by default, then I have failed. Every problem *We Descend* faces I have tried to describe as faithfully as possible, with as much evidence I could find. In this way, I wanted to avoid that people would think that I am attacking the medium rather than the message. Let me hereby state that I am very much in favour of digital fiction, only I want it to be good, not just hype.