Paratext

Step into another world.

Scarlett Thomas

You now have one choice.

You...I've been teaching my students in my apartment once a month since the campus shut down its offline operation and joined the network permanently. While I talk to the students about the concept of the post-human, which they understand to be "Like, dead?", my pod whirrs away in the corner, connected to the network (of course) but more specifically to the pods of my 15 closest friends.

A feat of physics created these quantum pods about ten years ago: grey boxes that look just like twentieth-century Apples but are capable of things you couldn't even do in fiction then. Our connected pods are running an AI program that was banned in 2012 after some government drone finally got around to seeing *The Matrix*. It's set up so that if a pod becomes conscious it will call one of our new-but-vintage cell phones (our revolutionary props). We don't know what we'll do then, but it's unlikely to happen anyway on a combination of 15 QII processors. Pods as the new proletariat? Whatever.

Becky said that when (not if) the machines start to think, their thoughts will be in code. She said that if you think using the stuff your world is made of then you make your own world. Then Rex wrote a story that had a guy walking home in the rain as the network awakens and all the lights start to go out in the Games and the Q-cars and the shops. When the guy gets home and looks at his pod, the only thing on there is a screensaver showing a garden going on forever — whatever forever is on a machine.

Becky was like: "But what does a machine want?"

It's 3:45; the sky is orangey outside and my students shrug every time I try to teach them anything. I glance at the cell phone. My agent hasn't called for days and I think my new novel's been rejected. What can I tell the students today? Once upon a time there were...records? Books? Malls? Last

week we talked about retro and nostalgia — all the fun of the postmodern. I told them I'd once thought people would run out of ways of recycling only the hairstyles, expressions of disgust and styles of wearing denim that existed between the invention of television and its death. Not even wrong.

I probably count as retro: my jeans; my sneakers. I don't have nano-shit on my face, ready to twitch my eye make-up into Beyoncé circa 2006, or Lt Uhura circa 1969. I can't — don't want to — make my hair into ringlets at the touch of a button. I don't wear a layer of thermo

sky, and now there are dwarves, elves and halfings in the doorways of what used to be Marks & Spencer, Virgin Megastore and Build-a-Bear Workshop.

The Games have many authors but essentially one story: you're on a quest to save the world, and you and some 'friends' must pool your potions, weapons and armour to fight the dragons, trolls and deformed birds roaming underneath the old shopping centre. The world can be threatened in several different ways. Lately I've noticed it's the online, not the offline, world you're supposed to save, but the result of saving it is the same: you get shopping credits, and violent sex with

whoever was on the picture on the Q-display outside. But you can have violent, offline sex with whoever you want in the Games. That's the whole point. You can hate the Games, but you can't avoid them; they're like shopping malls at the turn of the century.

Of course, I prefer the underground versions where the story (it's always the same story) has some depth, and the mutilation is worse (although mutilation without nano-patching is only for the truly suicidal).

When my novel is rejected, I'll end up writing for the Games. I'll write about evil siblings, destiny and nemesis, and I still won't make any money. And the university will eventually get something like the old Microsoft Office Paperclip to teach my students. It's all so depressing; I might not go home yet. Maybe just one game...

I walk up to the old bookshop, hold up my wrist and then type Y into the console. My phone rings. I look at the display. It's not my agent; it's my pod. No. Seriously? I check again. I wait a few seconds for flickering lights and/or the end of the world. Nothing. Then I walk through the doorway of the bookshop and step onto the grass.

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so thick that I hardly need clothes, like these kids: ready for the Games. Big surprises of the past 20 years? Obesity's gone, and no one plays videogames. Temporary cancers work wonders; and after governments, universities and shops all scrambled into binary, the Games finally went offline. So now there's real-time carnage amid the post-corporate concrete.

After class I walk through town to the only market, there for freaks like me who want occasional lettuces grown in fields, and real apples with pips. What has my pod ordered for me lately? Oh yes: a crate of stale ramen and two crates of non-vegetarian box-meals. At this time of day the Games are almost in Sleep mode, with their 24/7 neon pooling into the pale sky. The neon displays come in off the network, of course, as do the characters, stories and 'magic'. But when you play them you're off the network, and the pain is real. On my way back the neon has split from the