


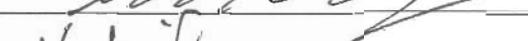
BARGAINED ILLUSIONS

by

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Bargained Illusions

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this to my parents, whose unwavering support in nearly every aspect of my life has allowed me to continue my studies and further explore my development as both an artist and human. Thank you.

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I would like to thank Gail Scott White for being both an amazing teacher and for being an incredible mentor, whose advice and guidance allowed me to explore and expand how I approach and conceive creative ideas.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **BARGAINED ILLUSIONS**

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George Mason University, 2011

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What is it to be human? It is more than genetic code, more than a belief that we simply exist, more than a classification. But what exactly defines who and what we are? Our actions characterize who we are; our journey through time identifies what we become. Who am I if I am not a merely reflection of my environment? I am the stories I have heard and told, the sacrifices I have made, and the bargains I have cut.

The desire for something more, something that will answer my questions about human life, is constantly present. It calls to me from the back of my mind. This voice, this temptation, calls to nearly all humans.

I tell stories seeking to discover inner truths, revelations about myself and my relationship to the world around me. Some of these truths have yet to reveal themselves; nevertheless, I relate to others through words and images, sound and touch, but the relationships still seem artificial.

What then allows me to identify myself as human, as part of a greater whole? It is the stories I tell when I am faced with one of life's many dilemmas, it is all I have lost, all that I have gained in my search for knowledge. We truly relate in the most primitive yet substantial ways in our lust to survive. For to be human, we must sacrifice, whether through innocent acts or grand deceptions, we must make bargains to survive in a boundless world of knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

I am the worlds I create. My hopes and dreams materialize in these realms. Through words and gestures, shapes, and colors, I continually discover new parts of myself. They are not only represented, but also recreated in an alternate reality where imagination is the tool in creation. These new found aspects of myself are something I seek to share with others in the best way I know how — through story.

Through the power of storytelling I explore the world through both held knowledge and knowledge yet to be tapped. The stories' evolution redefines my journey. I am always changing, so my stories rarely remain thematically constant. The characters learn and grow as I learn and grow, and the plot shifts to fit the current conditions.

My voice as a storyteller speaks of the human condition, endlessly searching, constantly isolated, even when surrounded by others, only finding salvation through the discovery of self and community — an ongoing quest. A common theme in my work is that the protagonists lose their way before they can find who they are. They are enthralled by the search for knowledge, which to them represents power. They sleepwalk through their lives until they are given a taste of what it feels like to live, wide awake and with purpose, a possibility they already possess within themselves, yet believe is purely

external. Once they have opened their eyes to the world of knowledge (and power), their goal becomes simple: to obtain it by any means necessary.

Power lures greed, and greed, in my characters, spurs irrationality. It is through this irrationality that they become willing to sacrifice all that they are, the culmination of their experiences, for a quick solution. A solution that in truth only causes more chaos and leaves the characters more lost than ever. They usher in their own self-destructive bargains, frequently damaging their relationships with others and their communities.

If only it were easy to attain what we want, to ask and simply receive. But in this, what would we really gain? It would be neither experience nor the means to grow as individuals. Yet we never stop asking for (and we never stop wanting) an easy solution. We make our own self-destructive bargains, from the white lie to a deal that compromises our morality. If we think we can become instantly famous, get rich quick, or stay forever young, then we will all too frequently eagerly enter into our own self-destructive Faustian bargains.

## **CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXTUALIZING THE FAUSTIAN BARGAIN IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

### **Defining The Faustian Bargain**

Nothing is free. We must struggle, tooth and nail, to attain what we desire. But, if there were an easier way, would we take it, the instant gratification, the quick pay-off?

This instantaneous gratification, this solution comes in in the form of the famed Faustian bargain, the selling of one's soul for power. Based upon the legend of Faust made famous in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany (Botler 3), the original publication "Urfaustbook," did what previous tales of enchantment did not. It spoke of the perpetually unsatisfied spirit led by scientific inquiry (Botler 4).

The character Faust, in "Urfaustbook," had access to all the knowledge that one human could possess by conventional means, yet he was not satisfied as he could not quench his thirst for knowledge. Science and study only led him so far. He sought answers to questions that none before him had been able to answer. He turned to otherworldly solutions, as he felt limited by the fact that he was merely human. Faust's quest for infinite knowledge, more than anything else, emphasizes the psychology of the situation (Botler 187), which recognizes that there are limitations to what humans can achieve. Faust wants to overcome what it is to be human and be granted access to infinite

knowledge. While many iterations of the Faustian tale are layered with Christian symbolism and hierarchy, the core of the story is rooted in the human condition.

### **Why The Faustian Bargain Is Relevant**

What are we willing to sacrifice, to lose, in order to gain? This is the root of the human condition as it is precisely the uncertain that we want to make certain, yet many life experiences defy rhyme and reason. The question of what are we willing to sacrifice forms the foundation of what we will become. Who we are is defined not only by what we will do, but also by what we will not do. We fear the very nature of the human condition, for to truly live we must experience the unknown and try to come to grips with it in our own individual ways. This is a massive and daunting undertaking, an undertaking that, even with the knowledge passed down from previous generations, frequently takes the better part of a lifetime to realize.

So, are Faust's actions (in his quest for knowledge he could not find on his own) really so foreign to us that we would not make the same choice were the opportunity presented to us?

The selling of one's soul is such an epic gesture and sacrifice that at first glance it makes the story of the Faustian bargain seem irrelevant to our everyday lives. However, the Faustian bargain can be found in the quick deals that we frequently make for profit without considering the true cost and future ramifications of our actions. Whether those ramifications come into being ten minutes after we make our self-destructive bargain or

ten years later, the result is the same. In making this bargain, we injure ourselves and the communities we live in.

While Faustian bargains are often thought of as a deals made with the Devil, they are actually deals we make with ourselves. They range from simple rationalizations, to arguably benign white lies, to cold and calculating decisions that have the potential to hurt thousands. In these immeasurable decisions we deliberately attempt to separate ourselves from the communities that we are tied to. Yet, no matter how hard we try to rationalize our actions, we do not live in isolation, and consequently our Faustian bargains harm communities and erode principles of social justice

### **Bridge Into The Digital Realm: How The Faustian Bargain Is Represented In The Digital World**

New media technology, with their power to instantly spread text, images, and video to worldwide viewers, represent radical changes in how humans share and receive information. New media culture promotes instant gratification in that one can type a single word into a search engine and then be presented with a myriad of results. What may have taken hours to find in a tactile universe takes no more than a few seconds in a digital one.

However, the digital age represents so much more than this. As a direct result of the speed of acquiring information the creation of new information has exponentially increased compared to decades prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, how do digital media and

digital art fit into our tactile universe and the rapidly increasing amount of self-destructive actions in which Western society engages?

Digital art may be understood as both the cause and a remedy for the self-destructive bargain within this context. The Faustian bargain is not only present in the digital world; it is quite prevalent. Interactive media such as videogames, while allowing players to communicate and form virtual communities with fellow gamers, can also lead to isolation and detachment.

What is represented as a number or score for defeating an enemy in a first-person shooter game fails to represent and recognize the life (or hidden human costs) behind the defeated avatar. First-person shooters tend to glorify violence, objectify bodies, and erode empathy. Game manufacturers and game players frequently rationalize first-person shooter games as simulated (unreal) experiences that are therefore harmless, since nobody actually dies. However, when these simulations become an individual's daily reality, the quest for a higher score or ranking has the potential to become psychologically damaging. While the negative elements that create self-destructive bargains for users in a simulated world may seem insignificant to some, the sheer number of people absorbed into these simulated worlds increases the probability of negative outcomes as the left over emotions from the simulated violent experience spill over into their everyday lives.



Interactive digital works create the same potential for both positive and negative outcomes. While a user's participation in a simulated environment can be negative, there is just as much room for positive outcomes, such as the creation of digital communities. While new media communication and digital bonds crafted across online populations are not enacted in a physical form, the online groups are creating new philosophies in digital art making and developing new conceptions of community and communication.

Interactive media do not stand alone in presenting numerous opportunities for self-destructive bargains to occur. The Faustian bargain can be presented in film either as purely a form of storytelling or overstimulation of the viewer in which the reality presented either oversaturates the viewer with imagery and action to the point where the viewer becomes desensitized to violent actions that negatively affect the psyche in regard to bending the lines between a simulated world and our "real" one.

Our choice and knowledge of the works we view comprise the bargain we make. And, as small as these decisions seem, the power in images and sound penetrates deeper into the mind and our current reality than one might think.

Again, just as film and video can impact us negatively, their ability to reach huge populations and communicate complex ideas allow this medium to be one that can be used to inform the public and create worlds that do not desensitize us but make us more

aware of the tangible world and the events happening right in front of our eyes that we may not otherwise notice.

### **Storytelling As The Construct In Forming Identity: The Story of Self**

A strong sense of self — who we are and what we want to become, and knowing the means though which to achieve our aims — can lead us away from making the self-destructive bargain. A strong sense of identity is something we all, at one point or another, struggle to realize. Our identity is constantly changing and evolving, but what is the catalyst of this change and what do we use to identify ourselves in such a complex world?

Each one of us is a story waiting to unfold; our journey, both by ourselves and in relation to others, defines who we are. Everything in reality is a story, from science as a collective tale, constantly growing and developing, to society itself as a giant construct of millions of narratives intertwined to create one community, one collected story.

As abstract an answer, as story seems at first, the more we realize how deeply storytelling penetrates our vision and creation of self, the more conceivable it becomes. The imposing presentation of the human condition in story, and how story seeks to answer some of life's most difficult questions, are one of the many ways story comes to define who we are and where we fit in our communities and world. Story is never created in a bubble of isolation. It is a relation or reaction to events in our world and ways, as humans, we can come to terms with things beyond our control.

Our interpretation of the world is what creates our identity. This interpretation is in itself a story, whether it comes from the educational system, family, or the broader community; how we define our lives in our own minds creates our identity, our story of self.

### **Defining Our World: Story As Human Identity**

Stories are told to us in order for us to interpret the world better. How we in turn absorb and process them shapes our behavior and how we react to the multitude of ideas and stimuli presented to us every day. Our interpretation helps us form the mental constructs, not only to survive, but also to actively take part in our world.

Story in a community is the sharing of ideas and is integral for the exchange of information and tradition. It is also the way in which previous generations catalogued their world and their reality and passed along the accumulated knowledge. In this way story is a means of teaching. It becomes a tool different societies can employ to communicate different human experiences and collective identities. As a universal form of expression — from song, dance, and theatre, to film and literature — story crosses all margins of life and is present and always growing in every society. Story is not only vital to how groups present and see themselves, but also to how the individual views and defines his or herself.

It is with this created identity that we commit our own Faustian bargains. From these bargains we can learn and grow, we can move forward with a stronger sense of self. Or,

we can let our identity be weakened and let our sense of self deteriorate to the point where we each become modern Fausts, committing acts that only serve to weaken who we are and what we can become.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THREE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND THE FAUSTIAN BARGAIN**

How can we, as humans, explore what is unknown to us? As an artist, the canvas, (whether it is a piece of parchment, a digital display, or a woodblock) is the metaphorical surface on which we create, depict, and explore undefined world. Every artist approaches the method of creation differently, but the aim is usually similar. It is to make manifest an experience, an experience in which both the viewer and artist feel as though they have been transformed. This transformation can be simply a stretch of the imagination, a shift in perspective, or a call to action.

Art is exploration, and since each individual experiences events differently, every creation is a unique experience. Understanding the why and how behind each creation allows not only for the communication of new ideas between artists and viewers and from one artist to the next, it allows other artists to see ways in which they might present their ideas in the future. So, it is not only an exploration, it is a means of communication, and a method of teaching.

**Eija-Lisa Ahtila**

Eija Lisa Ahtila is a multimedia artist whose work explores complex societal constructs through multi-layered, non-linear sequences through multi-screen formats. Her immersive video installations have a strong physical presence that connects to the absent. By fracturing and expanding the single moving image into a surreal experience, Ahtila contextualizes her fictional scenarios in real world environments (Aitken 18).

In Ahtila's work *Where is Where*, she uses multiple screen installations to depict a theme of colonialism in a fictional world, within the screen, where two cultures clash. The world within the screen is shown to the viewer through the eyes of a single character. While several characters are the focus of the piece, keeping a fixed perspective makes the viewer relate to all the various characters' experiences to one another, for the piece is about connection and our correlation with one another. What each character must decide and act upon establishes whether or not, in their fictional universe, they think a potentially self-destructive bargain could help them even if there is a consequence. For some consequences are worse than not acting at all.



Figure 1 Documentary Photo from *Where is Where*

In *The House*, a non-linear triptych video installation, time becomes the vehicle through which the character's deteriorating mental state is made accessible to the viewer.

Whether the character realizes it or not, by eventually letting her deteriorating psychosis become the norm of her world, she fashions a deal within herself which alters her perceived landscape and makes her permanently detached from reality.



Figure 2 Still from *The House*

Through the use of multiple simultaneous screens, various moments in time may be seen as possibly disorienting to the viewer, but also as creating an overlapping narrative that shows the character's lack of stability and inability to differentiate where she is in time.

Ahtila's work motivated me to look at the way the display of multiple "simultaneities" can be used to weave a complex story that doesn't rely on sequentially cemented images, but instead uses time itself instead of the image to tell a story. This non-linear approach in editing, from a stylistic point of view alone, allows for further exploration of time as a story in itself. Time serves as more than a catalyst; it also becomes a character.

Through the use of technology and storytelling, I have been able to approach my narratives with a fresh perspective that unlocks my preconceived notions of where beginnings must start and ends must finish.



**Ari Folman**

The artist Ari Folman is not only an established filmmaker, but also a well respected writer and producer. In his complete involvement with the crafting of his films, he is able to explore complex topics, not only delving deeper into human relationships but also exploring the darker side of humans, both in their relationships to themselves and how they justify themselves within their worlds. He carries out this exploration by taking on the subject matter from a personal perspective using his own experience to define the world viewers will see.

In his well-known animated film *Waltz With Bashir*, Folman tackles not only the role of directing but writing and production as well. This film is often referred to as an “animated documentary,” but it also powerfully depicts a personal investigation of Folman’s relationship with the Sabra and Shatila massacres and his involvement with them.

These massacres took place during the Lebanese civil war, where Israeli authorities indirectly made the slaughter of thousands of Lebanese civilians possible by allowing the Kataeb Party to enter the refugee camps where the killings took place (Asser).

This unrelenting film works with memories and, while rooted in a realistically detailed world, the piece often uses abstract imagery and sound to explore ideas of isolation, escapism and identity. *Waltz With Bashir* is more an autobiographical presentation of Folman’s reality and search for a truth that will lead to his understanding and

remembrance of his place and possible actions in the Sabra and Shatila massacres, events he cannot remember.

Throughout Folman's portrayal of the visually stunning worlds of Israel and Lebanon, displayed through muted colors and rendered in the style of comic books and graphic novels, Folman (re)discovers his own identity buried beneath repressed memories that slowly unfold in the film's narrative.



Figure 3 Still from *Waltz With Bashir*

While *Waltz With Bashir* deals with many themes, it ultimately represented to me, the bargain Folman made at the age of nineteen, knowingly or not, to participate in war and the events that led to the killing of thousands of innocents. Although he did not actually kill anyone directly in the massacre, he views his actions of illuminating the sky with flares, a scene that appears time and again and initially leads him on his quest to

remember his past, as an act that provided soldiers light in which to kill by. In Folman's mind this decision was as brutal as pulling the trigger himself.

The film itself is a realization, a healing process for Folman. His self-destructive bargain of being part of a force that killed women and children became lodged in his mind as a series of repressed memories, and is dealt with and brought full circle. The events he re-creates force him not only to visually re-construct tragic and destructive events, but to share them with others, giving rise to a haunting sense of self-realization. The realization in itself is the beginning of the healing process for the self-destructive bargain. His newfound relationship with his past self and the acceptance of his place amid tragic events is another important step in rectifying the self-destructive bargain.

Visually, I identify with the graphic, bold style Folman uses to construct his world. Aesthetically it is beautiful in the simplicity of color and what it brings to life in highly saturated colors or underscores in muted hues. The complexity of line and form to highlight what is important for a character in a landscape, and what it represents on a psychological level, resonates powerfully with the way I process and create my own images and interpret my experiences.



Figure 4 Still from *Waltz With Bashir*

The topic of Folman's film is heartfelt, brutal, and illuminating. It brings together many disturbing elements of the human condition to the surface, from regret and desolation to choice and identity, and the destruction that sometimes comes with it. In choosing to deal with such a devastating, yet prevalent aspect of the human journey, Folman admirably creates a fully fleshed-out world that I could only hope to emulate in my future work.

**Jim Henson**

Jim Henson is typically identified by his work with the Muppets, zany characters that although are sometimes seen as purely silly, through humor and absurdity have critically critiqued elements of the status quo, from political strife to economic well-being. The Muppets, and a large fraction of Jim Henson's works, from *Sesame Street* to films like the *Dark Crystal*, deal with aspects of human identity. While the Muppets are worldwide cultural icons, they represent a small portion of Henson's artistic endeavors.

Using puppetry, the art of storytelling in which theatrical or ritual-based events combine humans and pieces of the surrounding physical world to depict story, Henson was able to bring what is usually a medium that is seen as being limited into the public eye. This started with his show *Sam and Friends*, in 1955 (Dicks 216).

The importance of puppetry as an art form is its ability to blend human action into that of the inanimate, imbuing something lifeless with a life, a persona. Because of Henson's creativity and inventive blending of puppets and humor, the art of puppetry was brought into film and television on a broad scale. In the mediums of television and film, Henson's ingenuity at creating new puppeteering technologies enabled him to create works of impressive depth, reaching both young and old audiences alike. The seamless blending of live action and puppetry created realistic imaginary worlds never seen before.

It is Henson's worlds and the characters within them that inspire me. In his sympathetic array of characters, I see ways to coax imagination into multiple realities, ways to manifest the worlds I see in my head.

In Henson's most personal and artistically brilliant work *The Dark Crystal*, I discovered a world so complex, so fully realized, that I was awe-struck. No matter what stage of life I am in, *The Dark Crystal* and the story and world within it captivates me. Each viewing inspires a fresh take on delineations of the human condition I had previously considered. Upon watching *The Dark Crystal* again during my thesis preparation it finally struck me why I was so drawn to this work.

It is with this realization that I can happily incorporate one of the works I cherish and admire the most into my exploration of the Faustian self-destructive bargain. While the story presented is an age-old tale of light and dark, the way aspects of good and evil are fashioned and presented by the storyteller, it becomes a tale of self-sacrifice, of bargaining with "perfection." The characters that serve as a catalyst for the events in the film, the Urskeks, in seeking to go beyond perceivable perfection, ultimately destroy themselves and damage a world they had sought to help (Finch 9). This self-destructive bargain is visually represented by the ripping apart of the Urskeks' souls into both a light and a dark form.

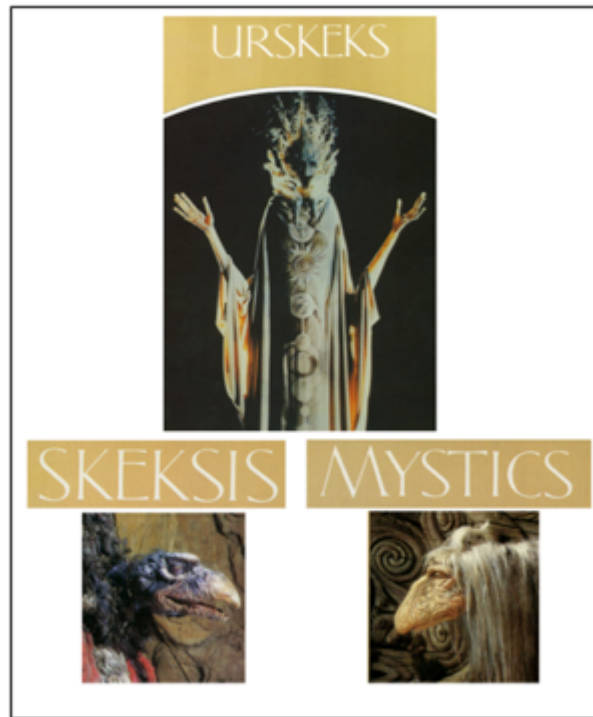


Figure 5 Stills from *The Dark Crystal*

What is realized in this story, unlike many others dealing with similar subject matter, is that there is a potential healing process, which is a way to unite both a light and dark side back together to restore a semblance of balance. While this mending process is accomplished through the symbolic healing powers of a crystal, the process in which the viewer is able to make the connection of the Urskeks' healing physically and spiritually is realized visually and metaphorically (through the use of the well-realized world and characters). The processes needed for the Urskeks to heal are visually simulated in a way that both young and old viewers can recognize and pull significant meaning from.



Figure 6 Still from *The Dark Crystal*

The ability for a film to craft such a brilliant world and story encouraged my realization that I could communicate ideas with others. This discovery is one that has stayed with me from my first viewing of *The Dark Crystal*, to the most recent.

In *Labyrinth*, a film formed in a similar style as *The Dark Crystal*, Henson once again teamed up with artist Brian Froud to create another living, breathing world. However, this time the world was populated by humans instead of only fantastical characters. Just as *The Dark Crystal* addresses identity and sacrifice, *Labyrinth* also delves into the ideas of a perfect world and the idea of always wanting more — the unattainable.

Sarah, the film's protagonist, feels that her family is forgetting her due to the birth of her baby brother. As the film opens, viewers witness her frustration and sorrow. At this point she makes a terrible choice initiating the Faustian bargain in the piece. While Sarah exists in the human world, she often lives in storybooks. Using fantasy she wishes her brother away. Her connection with reality and the disappearance of her brother, are the



sacrifice she makes. It is only when she realizes the damage her sacrificial decision will cause that she then decides to go on a quest to the world of Labyrinth, the place she has wished her brother away to.



Figure 7 Still from *Labyrinth*

Her quest is both an internal and external journey where she must change how she perceives herself and the world around her. Once she is able to do this, the world of Labyrinth becomes less a maze and more a singular path. In the final act, the realization of her decisions, and the consequences of them, are not enough to get her brother back; she must truly accept her brother's place in her world. In order for this to happen, Sarah's growth and reconciliation with her feelings of isolation from her family and the real world must be fully realized. Visually these emotions are depicted through her interaction with the characters and the world of Labyrinth itself. Had this not been a fully developed and believably engrossing world, the viewer would have not connected with either the protagonist or the secondary characters.

While *Labyrinth* is arguably lighter in its tone than *The Dark Crystal*, it nonetheless expands upon the ideas of self-destructive acts and, most importantly, the possibility for redemption. As humans, we make these bargains throughout our lives, regardless of whether we are conscious of them or not. It is the ability to rectify, instead of simply letting ourselves fester in our poor choices, that defines our characters. This is a message made clear in both of Henson's films.

### CHAPTER THREE: EXPLORING HUMAN IDENTITY THROUGH THE FAUSTIAN BARGAIN IN *BARGAINED ILLUSIONS*

#### **A World of Bargains: An Introduction into The Gallery Space**

Create a space, a world that erases the physical constructs (empty walls and hollow spaces) of a gallery, and, in turn, make a place that is approachable and, more importantly, absorbing. This was my goal for the installation of my thesis show, *Bargained Illusions*. I wanted viewers to have a meaningful experience and an engaged relationship with each piece. I did not want them to be distracted by sterile walls that screamed: “Stay three feet back at all times!” Nor did I want a silent gallery where a single cough echoes and diverts attention, as it is the only changing element within the space.

The world I chose to create was one that illuminated multiple facets of the Faustian Bargain. Each of the three pieces installed in *Bargained Illusions* shared common themes conceptually, but in highlighting each piece’s distinct style and world of ideas, I strove to make a universe where space created story as much as the work itself. Each piece broke free from the purely digital world to interact with viewers in a tangible way. The gallery, while divided into three distinct areas, directed viewers in a path that encouraged exploration and the sharing of both new and established ideas and motifs.

Whether you entered the gallery space and walked into the tragic world of “What Remains,” or moved towards the wholly interactive “Narcissist’s Dilemma,” the experience garnered by each piece was only further explored and developed in the surrounding worlds. While the “Narcissist’s Dilemma” strives to find an explanation as to why we make self-destructive bargains, the brutal world of “Devil in The Looking Glass” instigates decisions that leads viewers to be tempted by a literal Faustian bargain.

The three works share a common bond in the theme of the Faustian legend, but they also share a space, and in doing so interact with one another. These visual and thematic intersections influence how viewers experience the gallery space as a whole, as well as how they interpret each individual piece, and then form connections back to the whole.

### **What Remains**

What is it to live and have it all: power, dedication, drive? Would it be wondrous or would you only search for a flaw, a weakness; something that could steal all you have, all you think you are? These questions are present in the pretext of the piece “What Remains,” a single-channel animated short that follows the character Delo as he struggles with all that it means to be human, to live, and to face death. What follows Delo’s paranoia and quest for power, much like the Faustus character, are a series of terrible events where Delo defines, by no one’s motive but his own, what he is willing to become to achieve his goal of claiming ultimate power.

“What Remains” opens with an establishing shot of a large scrap yard. The camera movement further explores this discarded world. With a bright color palette that uses vibrant vector-based artwork to achieve a very “illustrated look,” the scrap yard scene forms the visual language of “What Remains.” This scene not only determines the piece’s style but also defines the world within the animation. It is a place where things — from buildings and paths to the care of everyday items — have been forgotten and neglected. This is the world we enter into.



Figure 8 Still From “What Remains”

Presented on a cracked tomb lid, set ajar from the sarcophagus itself is a frieze of the events that lead to the fall of Delo through his self-destructive bargain. Once the frieze is revealed, a spark of energy awakens the frozen images and they come to life. Without any dialogue the narrative tells the story of Delo’s fall. The color palette for this particular section of the piece is in direct juxtaposition to the colors that are brimming with life in the world outside the frieze.

The use of a monotone series of grays to illustrate Delo’s fall presents the frieze as being devoid of life, and separates it visually from the rest of the piece.

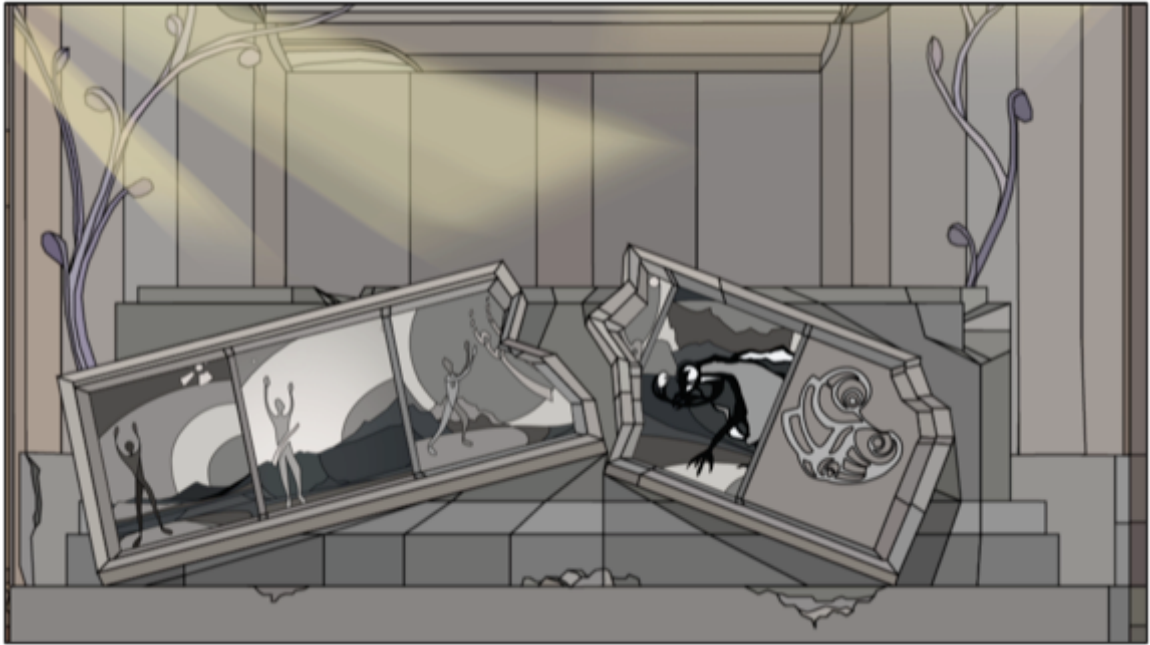


Figure 9 Still from "What Remains"

This separation between the world outside the shrine and that within the frieze makes the scenes of Delo's fall appear as a separate, freestanding narrative. This delineation is chosen to visually and emotionally separate the worlds of the piece as well as the two stages of Delo: that of him as a human, and that of him as a spirit. What follows in the frieze scenes is the ultimate sacrifice a human can make. More than just severing his soul from his body, Delo cuts his silver cord; a symbolic connection every human has to the afterlife or the universe itself. This severing is shown through simplified figures and the literal splitting of a body.

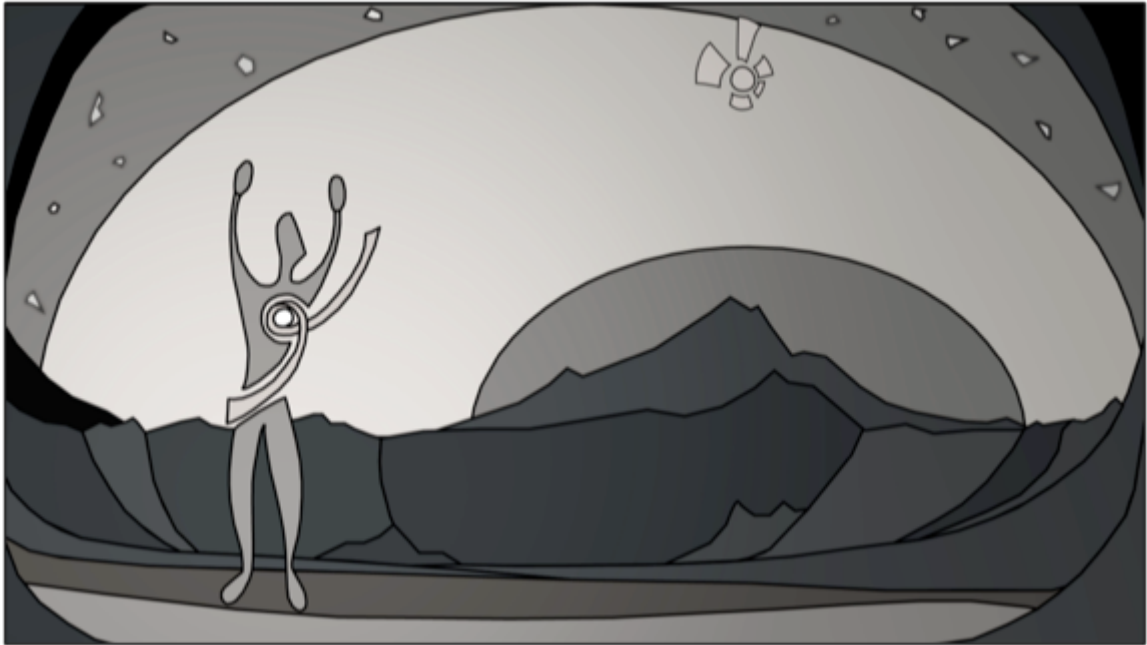


Figure 10 Still from "What Remains"

Delo does not make this sacrifice without knowing the consequences, but he makes it nonetheless as he believes he can attain the ultimate power in doing so. The ultimate power, or source of infinite knowledge, is represented as an ethereal orb that always remains just beyond Delo's grasp. After sacrificing his soul, Delo reaches for the heavenly orb only to have a barrier descend from the sky keeping him separated from his goal.

In ultimate desperation, Delo acts violently, sacrificing the lives and souls of others as he tries to get the heavenly barrier to recede. He first consumes the souls so that the offering to the heavenly orb is seen as his offering not the offering of the soul being sacrificed. He wants the power for himself, and himself alone. What is displayed visually is a figure with a hole in his chest, representing the absence of the place where the soul is often



thought to be rooted. Every figure killed from this point forward, has this hole in their chest to show that Delo is not only taking others physical bodies, but their souls as well. A simplified human face transforms into a demonic mask-like face, revealing the transformation of Delo's physical form as it comes to manifest his actions and his loss of humanity.



Figure 11 Still from "What Remains"

With the sacrifice of his humanity, his body, and his soul, Delo finally attains the ultimate power he lusts after. However, upon touching the heavenly orb he does not receive the power he longs for. As the heavenly orb represents the source of life, a holy wisdom meant for the spiritual, and not the physical realm, no matter his sacrifice, Delo could never attain what he wanted.

The orb, while not granting eternal wisdom, does return a piece of Delo's humanity.

What is shown at this point in the narrative is the reversion of a monstrous form into that of a man and then into that of an infant. Stripped of his body and a significant part of his soul what remains of Delo is his mind, devoid of sin — a newborn child. The stripping away of body and soul is shown through three symbols. Two symbols pull away and disappear from the infant figure of Delo; one symbol, that of the mind returns, and flashes bright on the form's forehead. The symbols of mind, (represented in green) that of body, (in red) and that of the soul (in blue) overlap to create one design. This design is used to represent Delo's identity before his fall.

With no body to return to, Delo appears as a translucent figure. The dark gray of Delo's form is again meant to contrast with the vibrant colors of the world Delo is experiencing. The viewer experiences the first day of Delo's newly reborn, child-like wonderment and questions what he experiences as he sees his world with eyes unclouded. He must redefine and in truth figure out what he is. He does this through his various interactions with the world, starting with inanimate objects, then through his experiences with humans.

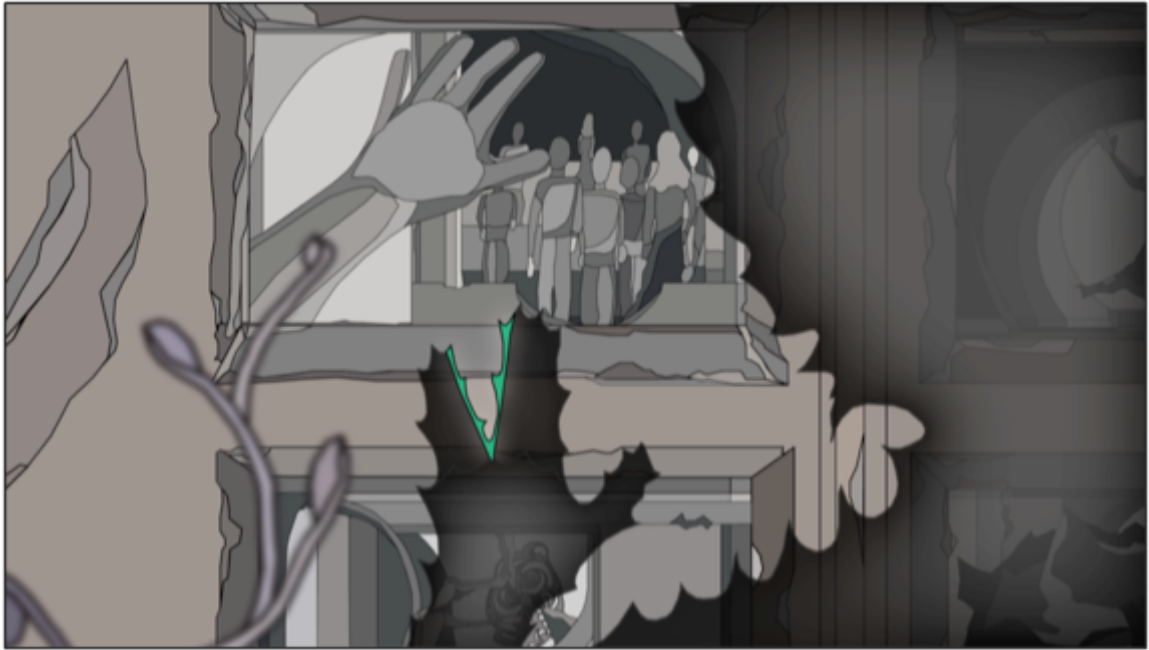


Figure 12 Still from “What Remains”

These experiences and interactions come to define what Delo is capable of, not only in his relation to the physical world, but also in relation to forming his identity. He is on a journey to become human once again and redefine what this means for him as he no longer possesses many of the characteristics associated with being human such as the tangible and recognizable display of emotions.



Figure 13 Still from "What Remains"

By the work's close, the viewer has seen again the various aspects of human nature shown through Delo's two interactions with children. The first contact is a negative experience, the second positive. The forming of a mouth that allows Delo to smile as night falls over the land, closing out his first day, is the initial step towards Delo finding his humanity even though he can never possess all the physical characters that society uses to define us as humans.



Figure 14 Still from “What Remains”

A large portion of “What Remains” is shown from Delo’s perspective. The choice in framing shots in this manner is meant to let the viewer connect with Delo. Putting the viewer in his place and experiencing the world as Delo does is integral to building empathy, so that when the shots switch to views showing Delo’s form, the viewer still feels a bond with this character. The use of the first person perspective also allows for numerous shots of Delo’s hands as they change as a result of his interaction with his world. The expressive nature of hand gestures creates another visual layer that conveys what is not said in words.

Multiple animation techniques are used to achieve a fluid and organic visual style. The environments are animated to the point where their movements seem extreme. This movement is created by the wind, a strong aspect of the piece. Its interaction with trees,

cloth, and other material creates a stark visual difference between the subtle movements of Delo and the intensely fluid movements of the environment generated by the wind.

A large portion of the environmental animations were done using a “puppet pin tool,” a digital tool that allows for the manipulation (such as the squashing or stretching) of an object. The majority of Delo’s movements are done using cell-by-cell animation. While these animations are more subtle, they again separate Delo all the more from his world. The third technique used was rotoscoping. This technique typically involves the capturing of gestural movement of figures based upon recorded video or stills. This technique creates the most extreme movements in that it captures the extremes of human movement. Every human in “What Remains” is animated using the rotoscoping technique.



Figure 15 Still from “What Remains”

The graphic illustrated style of bold colors and prevalent black outlines was achieved with vector-based software. This technique allowed for the creation of a very distinct look, yet because each shape is constructed from a myriad of points, the amount of time needed to create even a single background usually spanned at least fifteen hours.

However, this stylistic choice is one that serves to create a graphic world, which while detailed, retains a storybook-like look to it. This look allows the piece, as a whole, to be more approachable by young and old alike, both being able to identify and learn from this universal tale.

Sound is an integral part of “What Remains.” The soundscape is a mix of ambient environmental noises, wind chimes, and digitally recorded melodies that help to flesh out the world. The environmental aspects of the soundscape, such as the rustling of wind or the small chirping of crickets, provides a tangible backdrop on which Delo’s more abstracted sounds can be laid.



Figure 16 Still from “What Remains”

Delo’s movement throughout the piece is translated audibly through the clanging of wind chimes. This is first shown visually when the wind chimes outside the shrine stop moving, even though the tablecloth is still flapping fervently in the wind, indicating that the wind is still strong and that the chimes are frozen in place by some other force. The stopping of the chimes happens as soon as Delo is reborn. The extent to which the chimes are present and how they sound, either creating a dream-like, soothing sound, or a faster banging, unsettling noise, depends on Delo’s emotional state.





Figure 17 Still from “What Remains”

By the piece’s end the wind chimes, representing Delo’s footsteps and presence in his world, fall silent as he attains more human characteristics and no longer floats but walks. This change in sound is subtle, and is reinforced by a tracking shot that zooms in on the wind chimes that were, moments ago, immobile until Delo gained the important human quality of showing emotion. When Delo’s feet are planted firmly on the ground, the chimes stop.



Figure 18 Stills from “What Remains”

The musical compositions that bookend “What Remains,” serve to create distinct moods. The first composition begins upon entering Delo’s weathered shrine. This composition is the “voice” that serves to narrate the atrocities that Delo commits as a human. The layering of deep tones and the use of a lower musical scale on a keyboard, helps, along with the visuals, to construct an increasing sense of dread and desolation. The composition used for the piece’s conclusion is meant to retain a similar feel to the opening score in terms of which chords are used; however the pacing and shift to a higher scale craft a much lighter feeling composition.

While both compositions are integral to their scenes, the soundscape of ambient, environmentally driven noises remains consistently present throughout the entire animation for these sounds are another representation of the world outside of Delo. Thus the wind chimes and two musical compositions only appear at certain times, demonstrating Delo’s change. The root of the soundscape, being that of the world, remains constant throughout, as it is only Delo that transforms.

“What Remains” can be viewed on a standard digital display; however for my thesis show it was essential that it be presented on a larger than life scale to create an environmental framework for the animation. For this a seven-by-eleven foot rear-projection screen was used. With the positioning and scale of such a large screen, the space inside the gallery became altered and more physically dynamic in the way a viewer could see the animation and approach the screen without casting shadows or blocking the

animation from other viewers. The screen itself was suspended two feet off the floor so that it appeared to be floating. The placement of the rear-projection, screen so that it was not flush with any planes of the gallery walls and instead sat askew from any other planes, forced the inorganic shape of the gallery into something less mechanical.



Figure 19 Documentary Photo of “What Remains”

Another way in which the piece is displayed to create its own tangible world outside of the screen is through the presence of three large cutouts. These pieces, which are scrap heaps taken from the piece’s establishing shot, range from seven-by-eight feet to four-by-six feet. The large scale was meant to take the viewer into the scrap yard, further removing them from the isolated plane of the gallery space and into the imaginary world of “What Remains.” The presentation of the large-scale rear projection and cutouts proved to be a successful, dynamic strategy for encouraging viewers to interrelate with

the space around the screen, altering the visual level of interaction normally associated with a single channel piece.



Figure 20 Documentary Photo of “What Remains”

The soundscape, being organic and free flowing, proved useful in allowing viewers to enter the space of the piece at any time during the duration of the piece to first experience the crafted, tangible and audible world and then stay for the projected one. This tangible relationship was particularly essential as it altered how “What Remains” was approached. The piece became more than a screen, more than a world of bright colors and dreamlike sounds, and was one where Delo’s world was brought into our own. This relationship allowed for the viewer’s experience to be more personal as they not only had visual and audible experiences to pull meaning from, but a world that could physically absorb them as well.

### **Devil In The Looking Glass**

What is it that draws us to own our reflection? Perhaps it is the curiosity of how we look at any given moment, or our inability to identify with the person we see. If our own reflection suddenly disappeared and in its place another's took shape, would our own identity become a part of the individual that filled the space that, just moments ago, our image occupied? "Devil in The Looking Glass" is an interactive multi-layered video installation. With branching narratives that depend more on a viewer's choice than what is defined by the artist, the viewer's identity becomes subject to multiple shifts in perception, resulting in an altered reality.

To truly create a different experience upon each interaction, "Devil in The Looking Glass" required the creation of three parallel narratives. Each narrative employed the same narrator to entice the viewer to participate in a bargain that would free the Mephistopheles-like character from his prison, at a cost to the viewer. What started as an experiment in how to bring the viewer into the plot of a narrative in which he or she is more than a bystander and instead a catalyst, turned into a piece that not only had the viewer as a catalyst, but one that physically demanded that the viewer be an active participant since he or she must react and make decisions in order for different avenues of the narrative to be explored.

But how do you get a viewer to interact and be present in a video piece as more than just a bystander removed from the narrative and narrator by the screen? Finding the answer to this question was a challenge and even became quite frustrating at points where I realized I would need to return to square one and start again with a new approach. Nonetheless it was a truly enjoyable experience that allowed me to explore the psychological aspects of the self-destructive bargain. I was able to search for what it is that is embedded so deeply in a person's quest in defining their identity that it leads us to paths of destruction and thus how I can use these facets to influence how both the narrator acts and the viewer respond.

Beyond the psychological research was the examination of how to convey such a complex subject matter as the Faustian bargain in a way that the viewer feels that he or she is both hearing a story and, at the same time, part of that same story. Taking into account the physicality and all that would be needed to create an absorbing experience, the notion that this piece would be presented on a digital screen dissolved — back to square one for presentation.

It was at this point that I realized that many physical props would be needed in order for this piece to be successful. Simply placing a projection on the wall would do little to absorb a viewer; I needed to create a tangible space, in which this narrative could develop, a space where I could transport the viewer into a fully-realized place — a place that mixed the past with the present and in doing so created an alternate reality.

There are few experiences in my life where I felt as if I was truly transplanted from my reality into another. Of these few experiences all occurred at Walt Disney World, where half of the rides are designed to transport the park-goer into the realm of Disney's imaginary worlds. For me the strongest of these rides in this regard was The Haunted Mansion. The strength of this ride relies almost entirely upon the suspension of disbelief in order for the effects of the world within the ride to absorb the park goer. To achieve this, before riders even get on a train, they are brought into a vertically elongating room that physically transforms around them. In this room, they are greeted by a malevolent voice that introduces the world they are stepping into, and the possibility that they may never return to their own reality. This menacing statement psychologically implants the feeling that this place, this room and the ride itself, could perhaps be the real thing instead of a simulated experience. The threatening warning of the malevolent voice makes the likelihood of being trapped, like the characters within the ride, seem even more realistic.

The element of fear, as well as the use of elaborate moving set pieces puts the participant on the threshold of two realities, and all this occurs before the "true" ride begins. However, without this set-up and the creation of a set of beliefs and rules instilled in participants, the effectiveness of the experience on the ride's train portion would be severely diminished.

So, how could I do this? Budget and time were certainly huge hurdles, but not ones I would let diminish how I would craft this experience. First, I knew I had to do away with the standard presentation of video. The need to create two separate worlds became quite clear to me. One world for the viewer, and the other world would be one for the narrator. Additionally both worlds would need to overlap in theme and in physical and psychological space. The narrator would have to be compelling enough as to draw the viewer into his desperation and into his way of thinking. I contemplated how to achieve this, and I eventually finalized how I would present this.

Once the intention and direction of the piece were defined, the choice of how to develop the narrator based around the Faustian legend, and the manner in which the narrator would be presented, and would tempt a viewer, became points of contention. After researching the multiple versions of the Faustian bargain from Goethe to Nürnberger, it was Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* that I chose to draw from, as an inspiration in the way characters delivered lines and information. Marlowe's specific representation of the devil Mephistopheles as an enigmatic and zealous character was whom I chose to base my narrator upon.

In Marlowe's work, Mephistopheles is a mysterious and charming character who uses Faustus's contempt for the bounds of human knowledge and his own wit to get Faustus to sign away his soul to the Devil. While inspired by Marlowe's character, I only used the play and dialogue as starting points from which to develop my own script. My narrator,



also a devil-like character in his ability to access otherworldly powers, needed to be, at times, someone the viewer could empathize with and potentially sympathize with.

Marlowe's Mephistopheles is presented in such a manner that he only needs to tempt Faust; the more powerful and magical he seems the stronger his hold over Faustus is. My character, while sympathetic also needed to be cunning and frightening, so that when a viewer failed to sympathize with him, his forceful words would trigger a response instead.

### **The Narrative: Rationalizing The Wrong**

Each distinct narrative represented a different way in which the devil character goes about trying to persuade the viewer to make a decision. As this was intended to be an interactive experience, various endings were written for each of the three branching narratives. All three versions of the "Devil in The Looking Glass" script shared the same introduction, which showed the narrator, illuminated by candles and surrounded by a black meandering void, approaching the viewer.

At this point in the work's development, I chose to use the frame of a freestanding full-length mirror, with dimensions large enough to show a human figure to scale, as a structure to present the piece within. The mirror surface would be replaced by a rear-projection screen. The use of a rear-projection screen allowed viewers to approach the simulated mirror surface and not cast their shadows upon the mirror surface. Viewers could stand, face to face and interact with the projected image, without breaking the illusion of the world within the mirror. If the video was simply front-projected, anyone

standing in front of the mirror would block the images and the suspension of disbelief would fade before the piece even began. The credence and use of this frame and screening method became an integral aspect of bringing the narrator and viewer into each other's worlds.



Figure 21 Documentary photo of "Devil in The Looking Glass"

The narrative itself, while following the Devil's bargain motif, first and foremost needed to make the viewer feel as if there was something at stake for themselves and that their participation and ultimately their decision would influence how potentially life-altering events would turn out.

The beginning of the narrative introduces the narrator to the viewer; his dialogue allows the viewer to realize that perhaps by buying into what the narrator says he or she can achieve more in their life by helping him. And the narrator will, in turn help the viewer, if

as he says: “They...let him in.” However, before the narrator tries to convince the viewer to make any choices, he emphasizes how important it is that the viewer is present and that it is through fate that the two have met. This introductory dialogue is written in such a way that the viewer begins to form a bond with the narrator as well as feel more comfortable in the space.

In the opening sequence the space of the narrator’s world, which is a seemingly endless void of black, is revealed. However, before the opening sequence, the viewer first sees himself or herself in the mirror frame. When the narrator is revealed, the world around him is defined as an otherworldly blank space. His sporadic movements within this space, appearing at one moment close, then the next far away, help to make the world within the mirror seem curious. These sporadic movements eventually become normalized as the movements parallel the dialogue, as well as emphasize the relative weight of the words said. The more meaningful the dialogue is to the narrator, the more he not only appears larger in scale but remains in place longer.

Just as the need for a simulated mirror became apparent in my creation process, the necessity for a created space around the viewer needed to be investigated before I could move on with the script. How I crafted this space would determine not only how close the viewer would need to stand to the mirror, but also the physical feelings of isolation and separation from reality. I determined that the mirror should exist in what appeared to be a cluttered attic or storage room. The scale of the room and the need for a door to complete

this enclosure were vital concerns, as they would potentially delineate how the area within the room would be perceived and understood emotionally and physically by the viewer. The importance of having a door, instead of a simple opening, or a cloth that blocked the entrance, was to emphasize and capture the notion of opening and knowingly stepping across a gateway and moving past the threshold of the door into a strange undefined space. The room itself, in both the comprehension and realization, was to be dark, and only illuminated by the mirror surface and a scattering of hidden lights placed throughout the room. The use of darkness established a sense of the unknown and was meant to instill a slight hesitation upon opening the bright white door into a dark, almost hidden space.



Figure 22 Documentary Photos of “Devil in The Looking Glass”

The remainder of the narrative represents the various attempts of the narrator to have the viewer make a deal. Each version of the script went about this in a different fashion. In each version, a different side of the narrator was both explored contextually and

displayed emotionally. The context was created by how the narrator became trapped in the mirror in the first place. The displayed emotion was the way in which he sought to persuade and manipulate the viewer's reactions.



Figure 23 Documentary Photo of “Devil in The Looking Glass”

In one version, the narrator reveals at face value why he was trapped, because of his insatiable appetite for immortality. In this version, as with the other two, what seems blunt and revealing is instead something specifically constructed by the narrator. Until the ending, each revelation or emotion shown is a direct result of carefully calculated decisions made by the narrator to manipulate the viewer.

The element of choice is what “Devil in The Looking Glass” is about. How to present this component through the narrator's actions and dialogue and determining the viewer's

reaction, were among the final stages of development. The way I chose to handle this was through the implied sharing of a sip of wine, or for the viewer to pick up a goblet filled with red wine as if they were going to take a sip. Through the sharing of a blood-like substance the narrator is able to seal a contract with the viewer. This act corresponds directly to the blood pact Faustus makes with the Devil.

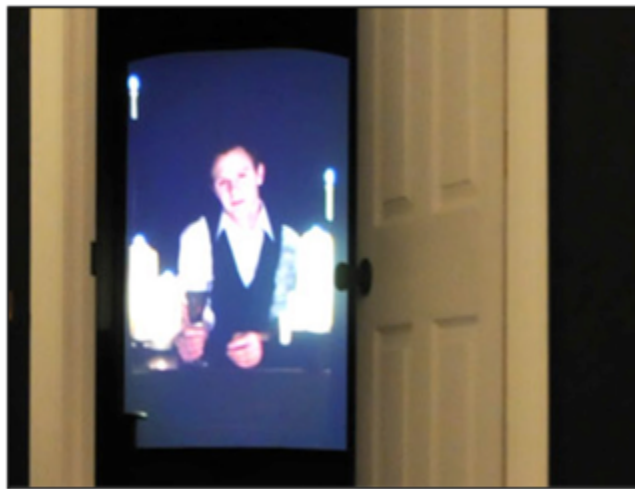


Figure 24 Documentary Photo of “Devil in The Looking Glass”

The wine-filled goblet appears and fills upon the narrator’s touch midway through each narrative. Outside the world of the narrator, on a stand next to the viewer, is an actual wine glass filled with blood-colored liquid. As the virtual glass fades from within the video, red L.E.D. lights are triggered from an Arduino board attached to the computer, which runs not only the branching videos, but also the sensors used to interpret the viewer’s choice. Through the illumination of the wine glass in the dark space surrounding the viewer, the effect of the wine glass seeming to appear or at least become obtrusively

apparent, is created. This action suggests the possibility that the wine glass next to the viewer is the same as the wine glass next to the narrator.

As many gallery installations have a very hands-off feeling to them, I assumed that some viewers might not pick up the wine glass, since touching the “art” is frequently frowned upon. Therefore, the use of multiple sensors to interpret the viewer’s decisions was built into the installation. So, even if a viewer did not pick up the glass, the user could still be able to participate and not have to worry about what they could or could not. If a viewer does pick up the glass as encouraged by the narrator, the pressure sensor beneath the wine glass would trigger and send a message to the computer and the code running and directing “Devil in The Looking Glass” would respond to this trigger accordingly. The trigger and response (as read through the Arduino device as a simple open or closed signal) determined which dissected part of the video would play next. Since there were multiple endings for each piece, if the viewer picked up the glass and made a bargain with the narrator they would receive one of a few possible negative endings, each determined by the master code. The time that each video section plays, however, is in direct response to the signal sent from the sensor.

If there is hesitation to pick up the glass, motion, (such as the waving of a hand or moving closer to the mirror frame) is encouraged by the narrator. This movement is detected and fed to the master code through a USB camera hidden near the mirror. If users choose to show movement, make a significant gesture, or do in fact pick up the

wine glass, then no matter what version of the script is playing, the narrator reveals his intentions, and thus is able to escape from his own personal hell. At this point, the USB camera captures the viewer's image, and the live video feed is fed and played back as part of the video narrative serving as the conclusion to the piece. The viewer is now trapped within the mirror.

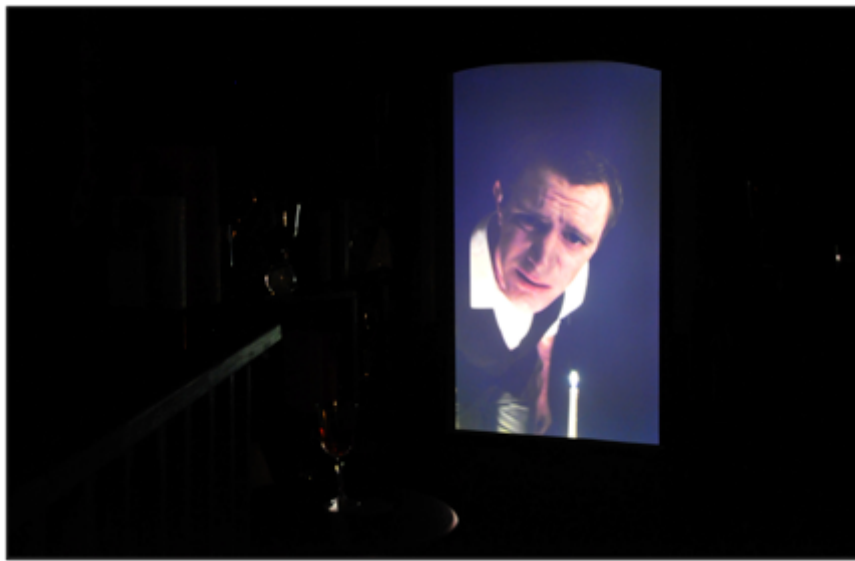


Figure 25 Documentary Photo of “Devil in The Looking Glass”

If the devil (narrator) fails to persuade the viewer, a scene filled with defeated and bitter dialogue follows. The narrator still tries to encourage viewers to make a decision, refusing defeat. What follows is the emotional and physical deflation of an overly pompous character as he realizes his efforts are futile. The candles, present throughout all scenes of the piece are extinguished, and the mirror surface goes blank, neither reflecting the attic space or the world within it.



This user-determined experience was an important element in my exploration of the Faustian bargain and the sharing of my findings with others. By setting up a situation that literally created a Faust-like situation in which the viewer must be active, I believe I was able to have a viewer examine the possible consequences of making morally compromising choices and then experiencing first hand how potentially destructive such choices can be.

### **Narcissist's Dilemma**

What is the root of the self-destructive bargain, what causes us to make such a choice?

There is no simple answer, as intention can be overrun by the reality of a situation. Or perhaps a decision is wholly selfish, without the thought or care of who is hurt as a result.

What type of bargains we make and the various outcomes they have, like it or not, define who we are.

As there is no simple answer for any individual as to why we would define ourselves this way, I sought a route in which I could perhaps understand, at the very least, the egocentric nature of society that tends to facilitate self-destructive bargains. What I found time and again in reading about modern society was the onslaught of examples of self-created isolation from not only one another as we struggle to get ahead, but also an isolation from identity we, as a society refused to investigate.

As someone who loves mythology and folklore, the character Narcissus immediately came to my mind. Not just the character and all that is typically associated with a narcissist, but the full story of Narcissus where his behavior ultimately disengages and destroys him. It is only when he blooms as a flower, after death, that he grows to understand his identity (Vecchio 3).

In the myth, it is prophesized that if Narcissus never knows himself than he will live to an old age. He, in turn, thinks he finds himself in his reflection. The obsession with his own image is what eventually leads to his death. The prophecy for Narcissus is quite a tragic one, for to never know oneself and thus never inquire into the many questions of life, the experiences that make life worth living, is a terrible existence. Yet the more I read in what makes an individual behave in such an egotistical manner, I realized more and more that modern society has come to be defined as a culture of narcissists (Lasch 101).

Narcissism manifests in current western societies as a reality in which we have to cope with the tensions of modern life and the dominant social conditions that are prevalent in our time. The individual isolates him or herself with manufactured illusions to escape the overstimulation of culturally created tensions. Reality therefore does not appear to the individual in a heightened sense; instead it is a reality, which they struggle to tune out and become indifferent to (Lasch 160).

This indifference comes at a high price — our relationships with others. This in turn injures us as individuals. This indifference, that I would say is society's collective destructive-bargain, was something I not only wanted to understand better but also find a means by which to rectify this apathy. As this was sequentially the third project I was developing in my Faust-related projects, I felt that I had a growing understanding of the psychological underpinnings of this societal bargain and could now seek to deal with this issue in ways where indifference could turn to empathy. If the consequence of our actions

was made more apparent and relevant to our lives, I believed I could alter the way in which we handle not only the development of our identities, but also our relationships with others. Similar to “Devil in The Looking Glass,” I knew the strength of this piece would not only rely on the involvement of viewers as more than bystanders, but also engage them in a world where the constructs of identity, choice, action, and consequence were at their fingertips.

The research for this project spanned numerous other tales of self-destructive bargains, from the seven deadly sins, and the symbolic representation of human characteristics in various cultures, to that of personality types and how humans ultimately relate to one another and form connections to their environment. While I had gathered a plethora of information, funneling what was truly meaningful, and in turn useful, to this project became the first of many hurdles. Were symbols the best way I could signify action and the means with which users would interact with the simulated world? Would the seven deadly sins perform a function within the piece or would their historical associations hinder what I wanted to achieve?

These issues had to be put on hold as the definition of the user-interface and how the simulated world would be displayed and interacted took precedence. If this was not done successfully then the content would be meaningless. I moved from one possibility to the next in the way this piece could play out, from an adventure-like game to a very basic simulated role of choice or inaction. I ultimately decided that constructing a program

from the ground up would serve me best as I needed the freedom to define the responses and level of interaction that would best suit the world I was hoping to present. Previous solutions were not only either too simple or too loosely defined to paint the messages I wanted, but also they were also already tied to platforms that limited the freedom in which I could make changes and create something entirely new.

The decision to create a work of art that needed its own program to be successful moved “Narcissist’s Dilemma” from a solo work to one with a collaborative process. Working with a talented artist and friend (and for this project, most importantly, an excellent programmer), Matthew Yeager, we were able to transform this piece from a list of concepts and core ideas to one brimming with stimulating interactive visual elements.

Once the need for a program was determined, the project hit the ground running in terms of defining the experience the user would have. This time, however, I had the expertise of Matthew to help determine what was plausible, and what was an idea that, while perhaps strong, was in truth counter-productive in regard to the time limitations associated with the completion of the project.



Figure 26 Concept Art from "Narcissist's Dilemma"

Gone were the universal symbols meant to represent choices and action as well as time triggered events meant to lead users along a certain path. These symbols proved to be too abstract in their denotation. I needed to be as clear as possible, therefore the use of words to define how a user characterized him or herself and their relationship with their world became a key element within the piece. The use of symbols was not entirely eliminated however; symbols became mere representations of choice instead of embodying the choice itself. Symbols thus changed based, on a user's decisions and interpretation.

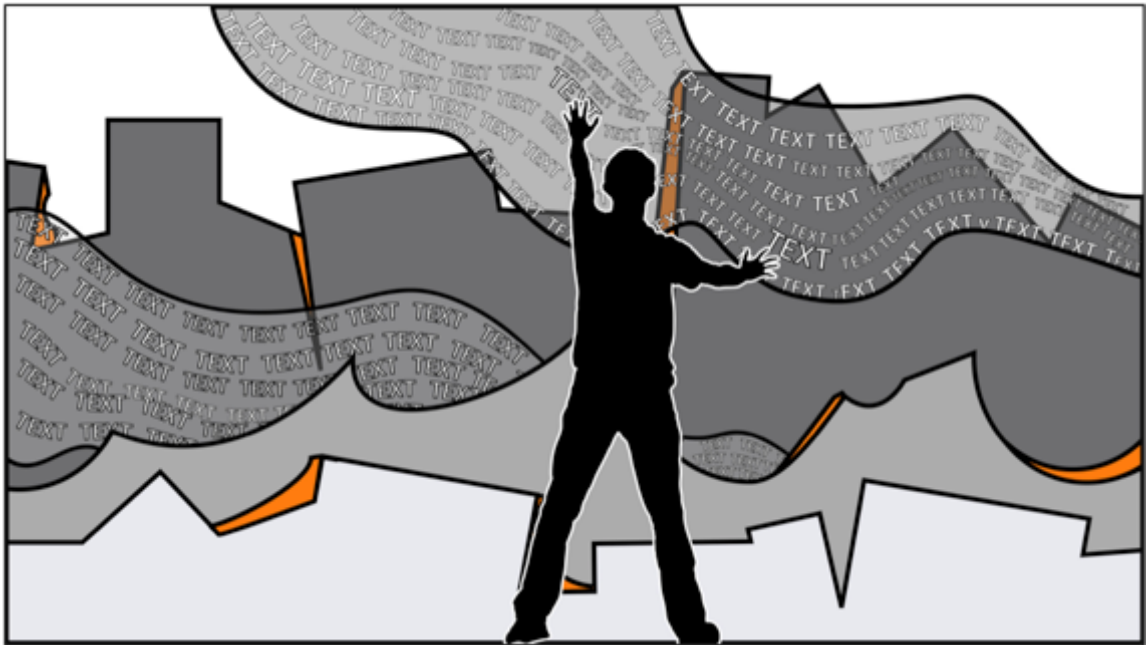


Figure 27 Concept Art from “Narcissist’s Dilemma”

What progressed from this point in terms of development was identifying, for myself, what the project sincerely needed and what was extraneous, as even in constraining the meaning of symbols there was a lot for a user to take in. The need to streamline “Narcissist’s Dilemma,” and make it more accessible to those not familiar with simulated worlds and experiences where the rules are more defined by experimentation than obvious instruction altered the aesthetic presentation as well as the technology needed to build and make the world interactive.

“Narcissist’s Dilemma,” unlike the two other works in *Bargained Illusions*, did not use rear projection. For this project, front projection was the best use of technique. Users’ choices were defined and fed to a computer and Matthew’s program via a USB camera.

These choices were then incorporated, by the program, with the simulated world of text and vector-based backgrounds. Once this information was gathered, it was projected onto a designated wall space parallel to where the user was standing.



Figure 28 Documentary Photo of “Narcissist’s Dilemma”

Visually, each participant is represented as an empty silhouette. Around each human silhouette are words associated with distinct personality types; words participants could use to identify themselves. Each user chooses the words that best embody their identity by reaching out and grabbing, with a gloved hand, each word and dragging it into their silhouette. As a result of each word or phrase being dragged into them, a symbol appears within the silhouette, visually registering, the movement and incorporation of the



signifier word into the body. This beginning stage of the project is meant to give the user an ample amount of control in defining who they believe they are. Once this stage is complete, the central part of the project begins.



Figure 29 Documentary Photo of “Narcissist’s Dilemma”

The user’s silhouette, complete with chosen identifiers, is transported onto a randomly generated backdrop that represents either an organic space or a highly structured, mechanical one. This space is the world in which the user’s silhouette exists. It is the world in which the user sees him or herself and is meant to make decisions that affect how their silhouette (their id and ego) joins the space it has been transported to.

Streams of text, bound in abstracted clouds, move horizontally across the background, either wrapping around an environment or remaining behind it. The user's silhouette is always the focus and as such remains at the forefront of the layered environment.

Being titled "Narcissist's Dilemma," the user is ultimately defined as a narcissist; however the way in which they choose and interact with the words and environment is more significant in defining, creating and further establishing an identity that represents whether they will move toward being a more narcissistic individual or a more altruistic one.

The speed at which the words appear, and how users react to the movement of the streams of text, influences how easy or difficult it can be for users to select the words they think they want to define themselves. The clouds of text, generated at random from a large database within the program of words and statements, both altruistic and narcissistic, speed up and slow down based upon whether the user places a hand over a particular cloud. To slow down the progression of text, users must only put a hand on a stream of text. Then, much like the first stage of the piece, grab the text and place it into their silhouette.

Movement is restricted to moving left and right horizontally, as forward and backward motions would alter the scale of the silhouette which needs to remain large enough to

show the full figures and symbols within. Moving forwards or backwards would alter the information captured by the USB camera, and thus alter the projected visual world.

The selection and capturing of words to create or redefine identity is the user's main activity. These choices are represented visually by organic, light colored shapes that appear within a silhouette with the choice of altruistic words. The narcissistic words are represented by muted grays that appear as fractures, and cracks. The main difference between the two, aside from shape and color, is the way in which they act within a figure. The altruistic words and shapes make the user's silhouette more opaque the more that are present. In this action, the user can see the world behind them more clearly and the line between what is the user and what is the world and society they are in becomes blurred. The negative words keep the silhouette from becoming opaque and in fact further clutter and clot what is inside the user. This action visually removes the user farther and farther from the space that surrounds him or herself.



Figure 30 Documentary Photo of “Narcissist’s Dilemma”

The visual representation and use of text and the actions that the code and program need to respond to seemed simple enough. It was however at this point, especially after Matthew demonstrated how much the technology would need to be manipulated and the code restructured in order for the choices to be realized, that I realized just how taxing this project would be on Matthew. The solutions created from these technological limitations forced us to further streamline the visuals, and the means and level of interaction.

The ability for Matthew’s program to be able to recognize a figure and be able to identify where the individual’s center and hands were located resulted in the need for a physical

creation that could define to a camera the user's choices and feed them appropriately to the code. The result was a complex jacket that would hold multiple lines of wire in place, and have specific colors present in areas so that the code could distinctly decipher the center, from either the right or the left hand. Further, the jacket would have to house the Arduino board that attached to triggers in the gloves that were sewn onto the jacket, and that allowed the code to recognize when words were being selected, moved, and released.



Figure 31 Documentary Photo of “Narcissist’s Dilemma”

The use of a jacket was one of multiple solutions that would allow for the translation of code; however as it forced the user to take a tangible object and literally connect with code, I found it integral in grounding a virtual piece in a physical space. The strength of

the jacket was two-fold as it not only had physical properties, but also translated visually into the simulated environment.

To keep the user from simply manipulating the world once they became accustomed to the properties of how its elements worked, and simply select words they thought others would want to see them select and not words they truly felt, a maelstrom of words was integrated and timed to appear at certain points in the piece, filling the user's silhouette with negative words representing outside influences. The use of the maelstrom was also to show that no matter how strong we think we can define and sustain an identity as a constant, we do not live in a vacuum. The maelstrom is the coalescence of this.

Users could potentially spend an infinite amount of time within their digitally constructed world, however as this work only allowed for one individual to participate at a time, the implementation of a time limit was necessary. This restraint ensured that many individuals could experience the project. Also, in order for users to visually see how the words and choices they made fit with the choices made by others, at the piece's close they were presented with a specific symbol defined by their choices. This puzzle-like symbol was physically present next to a canvas labeled the "Community Map." In choosing their symbol, and placing it with the others who had completed the piece before them, users could see their place in relation to others' simulated worlds and thus could relate to symbols that interlock with theirs, or perhaps were the same as theirs.



Figure 32 Documentary Photo of “Narcissist’s Dilemma”

This placement of a physical object, is intended to be yet another tangible way for the user to take something from a purely digital world and not only identify with, but connect to the choices and worlds of others.

## CHAPTER 4: THE GALLERY INSTALLATION EXAMINED

Through research and craft, I brought to life, to the best of my ability, the world of the Faustian bargain. However, the success of *Bargained Illusions* relied on how viewers interacted and responded to my worlds. As the show was setup in a circular orientation, (to encourage progress fluidly from one experience to the next), the reaction to my pieces as a collective, is quite different from that of only experiencing one piece and not the entire show as an interrelated compilation of ideas.

### **Reflections: Worlds Within The Gallery**

“What Remains,” the piece that not only takes up a majority of the gallery space, due to its scale and need for a longer projection distance, is also the work that first confronts the viewer upon entering the gallery. Through direct interaction, as well as observance of viewers’ responses to “What Remains,” I felt that this piece was successful in drawing viewers into the world of Delo, largely due to the size of the screen and the viewer’s desire to inspect and move through the large cutout scrap heaps placed before the rear-projection screen. Once viewers were physically captured in Delo’s realm, I felt that the abstract and ethereal soundscape, as well as the distinct vibrant visual style, further encapsulated the viewer.



Whether or not a vast majority of viewers enjoyed the story of “What Remains,” or the various ways in which they interpreted the animation was a positive one or matched my intentions, is something difficult to determine. What I was able to surmise, was the work’s ability to attract and keep viewer’s attention even though it had a longer run-time than most animated shorts as well as slower pacing. The slower pacing, combined with abstracted musical compositions and ambient sounds, allowed viewers the extended time necessary to view and process the layers of meaning and action present.

As an installation piece, “What Remains” was successful in its aim to be a separate space that forced viewers to view and engage in a single-channel animation. Had the animation been presented as a simple front-projected work, with no sense of setting or the need to interact with a space, the likelihood that viewers would have stayed for extended durations would be highly diminished.

The three pieces of *Bargained Illusions* have no set order in which the viewer must experience them, however continuing in a familiar clockwise circular movement, the next piece a preponderance of viewers progressed to was “Devil in The Looking Glass.”

Out of all three pieces, the rigorous work and extended time it took setting up “Devil in The Looking Glass,” and the highly detailed world within a fully realized eight-by-twelve foot free-standing room, in addition to the sensors and code needed to interpret viewer responses, turned out to be this piece’s greatest detractor. The installation of the eight-by-

twelve foot room and the painting of the exterior, combined with the amount of furniture and equipment that filled the space, required three days to assemble. By the time the mirror-framed rear-projection screen was in place and the projector correctly calibrated and angled, it was opening night. Despite this timely process, everything was ready. The computer, built with specific core elements for this piece, was loaded with all the correct sounds and corresponding video into a library for the code to pick from for every possible viewer response. However, it was in the code used to carry out the responses of the sensors and direct the video segments and audio feedback that the piece stumbled.

What viewers experience with “Devil in The Looking Glass,” was the presentation and representation of all the ideas I explored and fashioned into both the world of the room as well as that of the narrator. The interactive elements that really would have taken this piece one step further in absorption were missing. The solution to this would take more time. Unfortunately, that was something unavailable for this particular presentation of *Bargained Illusions* and more specifically, “Devil in The Looking Glass.”

Despite the lack of the interactive elements, “Devil in The Looking Glass” was still able to achieve a level of success in bringing viewers into another realm and confronting them with the narrator’s demanding and captivating reality. The use of a mirror-framed display and the complete removal of a viewer from the gallery space, still allowed me to achieve the emotional effect I was aiming for.

Two of the three branching narratives were presented in a looping format that still allowed for the realization of the devil and his attempts to force a bargain. The lack of interactivity took away the viewer's choice but not their direct presence in the piece, and as the script was written and adhered to in a manner that, no matter the viewer's level of interactivity, the viewer remained the focus as they are the ones the narrator needs to persuade. "Devil in The Looking Glass" achieved its success in conveying emotive and empathetic responses that either triggered pity or fear. Both responses were critical in realizing and better understanding the level of destructive elements the Faustian bargain possesses.

"Narcissist's Dilemma," the most technologically complex of all three pieces in *Bargained Illusions*, proved to be the most successful in its conveyance of presented ideas and motifs of identity and community. I believe this was a direct result of the level of immersion and control viewers possessed. Matthew's program ended up running over four thousand lines of code. Throughout the show's duration this code only became more compound, as *Bargained Illusions* served as the work's first play-testing.

By the close of *Bargained Illusions*, the piece was not only more refined, with clearer user-generated results, but also a longer running time than initially set up to allow users a longer period to get their bearings within their digital realm. Through these modifications, the intentions of the piece became clearer. This work was just as much

about a single user's experience as much as it was about collective experience. The feedback used in the play-testing, only went further to prove this.

The jacket used to interpret the user reactions and choices, while mostly successful, as a prototype ended up with less than optimal results. The sizing of the jacket was constructed for a full-grown adult male, and thus the tension needed to trigger the sensors was tied directly to this. As a result, viewers needed to find their own solution to create this necessary tension if they did not fit the jacket. This solution usually resulted in viewers pulling the sleeves up more on their arms to make the gloves fit tighter and create the needed tension for the sensors. Despite this drawback, as a prototype the jacket worked surprisingly well. While varying sizes of the jacket or the implementation of different sensors to trigger responses, would have been great, for its first time in action, "Narcissist's Dilemma" simply being able to realize the ideas and desired reactions and responses in terms of how a user realizes the importance of community, provided enough positive feedback to make this prototype be one that is taken further and built upon so that it adjusts better to accommodate different body types.

The individuals that helped me not only to conceive these pieces in a mental space, but fully realize them in the gallery, from my committee members and Matthew, to many other friends and family members, whose assistance helped to not only create the show itself but shape the experience in implementing my ideas, allowed me to fully acknowledge the creation of art as a community practice. The ideas present in the pieces I

had thought were mine and mine alone, yet without feedback and physical assistance, would not have grown or developed. If these ideas stayed in isolation, they would have been stunted in many of the areas that proved to be their strongest characteristics that brought pieces to life and allowed them truly to blossom.

*Bargained Illusions* was an extraordinary experience, speaking strictly as the creator of multiple fictional worlds. As a collective, I feel, at the very least the pieces made viewers aware of our everyday Faustian self-destructive bargains and the potential we have to control them. Whether viewers took away my desired inference is not what is important to me. What is crucial to me, is that every viewer, whether they enjoyed or did not care for particular pieces, at the very least felt a part of the work and were able to make a connection, even if just for a split second, with a world or an idea present in one of the works.

This connective aspect, so important to me in gauging how successful I believe this particular collection of work was, is due in large part to my personal desire to reach others through the act of story. Story comes in so many forms, both direct and indirect; however the connection is one between one human and the next. These were my creations and my interpretations of universal themes, and in being funneled through my mind, became a part of me. When a viewer connects with a piece, they are experiencing a part of me. This sharing of ideas and knowledge is what art is about. As humans we do

not exist in isolation, so why should my ideas not only be open to multiple interpretations but even more importantly be a means in the sharing and exploration of others' ideas.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### **Where to Go From Here**

The entire process of creating and realizing *Bargained Illusions* was that of a period of growth, of exploring new ideas as well as how I could better understand and respond to the world around me. I walk away having experienced such a vast array of realities, from that of fellow artists to that of individuals I have only seen, but somehow feel connected to.

How does my story of self grow from this, how do I react, respond? I now feel I am one step closer to better understanding and actualizing the person I feel I am slowly developing into. The biggest questions that face me as an artist and as an individual are: where can I take my art from here and where will it lead me? In investigating numerous ways to deliver stories and present complex multi-faceted ideas, I recognize that being content in only half realizing ideas, whether they seem limited by format or by a lack of knowledge, is not an option. To explore, and perhaps succeed, perhaps fail, is what will take me further in my ability to tell stories and reach others, to become a better artist.

The journey in creating *Bargained Illusions* has led me along many paths to one where I can face the world and respond more comprehensively to all that is thrust upon me.

Whether experiences are positive or negative, I now have the means and need to further

understand elements of the human condition as those broad characteristics present in the Faustian bargain are but a doorway to further pieces in which I can explore, identify, interpret, and change the world around me.



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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

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