

Interview—Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin

The co-authors of *Terminal Games*
interview each other

PAT: When we wrote the first version of *Terminal Games* in the mid-1990s, the computer world was very different. This revised and updated edition tells the same story—but doesn't that story seem different now?

WIM: The book was routinely compared to works of William Gibson and the other “Cyberpunks.” Since it was all about computers and cyberspace and such, most people automatically figured it was futuristic science fiction. We found it hard to explain that it wasn't that sort of book at all—that it was actually about things already happening. Even back then, we knew people who were spending an unhealthy amount of time in the darker parts of the Internet, substituting real relationships with “virtual” ones. Now, of course, times have caught up with us. Some parts of “The Sims,” for example, look quite a lot like some parts of *Insomniana*. I imagine anyone who has spent any time at all online—especially, say, in chat rooms—will know that *Terminal Games* is very much a story of our time.

It makes me feel a bit queasy to have the times catch up with us. How about you?

PAT: It makes me queasy and more than a little sad. It's clear that in some ways the Internet has topped us. Some stuff online is more brutal than anything we imagined. And some people are certainly using the Internet with intent to harm others.

In our story, it isn't so much intent to harm that causes trouble, it's that the characters have little intent at all. They have little personhood, and are looking for something that will give them a sense of being *someone*. They don't have a clue what a real relationship would be like, and settle for an electronic substitute. They have no experience of connection with others and grab onto anything that feels like connection. Of course, that kind of emptiness isn't limited to Internet relationships, it's already loose in the world at large.

What does a fictional character—or a real person—need in order to escape that condition?

WIM: You do need a strong sense of who you are. You need to be able to look in the mirror in the morning and have some idea who you see there. That sounds easy, but it's not. A strong sense of personal identity is especially difficult to acquire in a culture that bombards you with ideas and images of who you *ought* to be—of what you should look like, what you should wear, where you should live, what you should own, how much money you should have, and so on. On *60 Minutes*, we saw an interview with an advertising consultant whose specialty was tapping into the “reptilian brain” of American consumers, getting past their rational identities and tapping into their unconscious, primal instincts—solely for the purposes of making them buy things! It takes a powerful sense of

self to resist that kind of media bombardment. As you've already suggested, it's also impossible to have authentic relationships without a strong sense of identity.

Ironically enough, the original publisher of *Terminal Games* imposed an artificial identity on the two of us. Since a thriller with two authors' names on it was considered unmarketable, we had to assume a pseudonym, a single fictional authorial identity—a male writer (it *had* to be male!) named “Cole Perriman.”

Wasn't it weird that we were writing about virtual identities, and got pushed into becoming a virtual author?

PAT: A lot of things were weird about our first venture into the publishing world. In this case, their insistence was partly because *Terminal Games* a thriller—an adventure story. Then they got annoyed that our thriller, and the one that followed it, was too full of ideas.

We like using fun genres to deal with things that we want to think about. And the murder or mystery or mayhem stands for the very real importance of the ideas, for example that not having an identity is dangerous ... that substituting virtual relationships for real ones is extremely risky. It can take your life, if not physically, still in fact.

We went along with it. We even talked finding an actor to play Cole Perriman, to do readings and sign books. Of course, the publisher had no interest in us. I think they would have been perfectly happy promoting a handsome substitute—a mask.

But how well do masks work out in real life?

WIM: Everybody has to put on masks of one kind or another, I suppose, just to get along in society. But you have to know who is behind the masks—there has to be somebody there. Otherwise, you become completely, hopelessly lost.

In our book, that loss of identity can literally become fatal. In *Terminal Games*, the murderous clown Auggie preys on people who lack relationships, who lack all sense of self. I find him one of our most intriguing creations.

What do you think he represents?

PAT: Auggie's particular strength is that he's able to represent whatever our characters long for. Like the guy who talked about tapping into the “reptilian brain,” Auggie understands that our most powerful needs can lie hidden beneath our conscious perceptions—and that's where Auggie lives. In a way, that's what generates Auggie.

But Auggie is, specifically, a clown. Most of us encounter clowns as children; some of us find them funny and some of us find them frightening. But perhaps there's more to clownhood than our childhood experiences at circuses and birthday parties. The clown is the fool, the jester, one of those archetypes that some say lie in all human consciousness. He's a trickster—the magical being that brings life and happiness but who might in a childish rage take it all back again.

Why are such familiar images so powerful?

WIM: Well, they may be all the more powerful for being unacknowledged. You and I have long been interested in trickster myths, and in our research we've keenly noticed how such myths have been belittled and denigrated over time. Scholars explain away stories of characters like the Navajo Coyote, the Inuit Raven, or the African spider Anansi as simple lessons in how *not* to behave. Really, such stories tap into something much deeper—a wild, untamable, contradictory, irrational part of the human spirit that we ignore at our peril. The trickster is enormously complex and ambivalent. Tricksters are alternately portrayed as cowardly and heroic, greedy and self-sacrificing, incredibly stupid or incredibly wise. Really, tricksters are all those things at once. Coyote and Prometheus (who is rarely recognized as the trickster he is) both steal fire from the gods and give it to humankind. This myth hints at how much the world needs its tricksters, and all that we may lose if we shove them aside.

But the more authoritarian a culture gets—and our culture is more authoritarian than we like to admit—the more it denigrates its tricksters. It's then that a figure like Auggie, an archetypal clown figure, loses his charm and becomes downright dangerous, as he does in our book.