

The Intertextual Parasite Mechanical Exploitation in Jonathan Ball's *Ex Machina*

From *The Matrix* to *Frankenstein*, the idea of man's creations revolting against him has always been a popular masterplot, tapping into the fear of being replaced. However, Jonathan Ball's book, *Ex Machina*, takes this trope to a new level of terror through its use of interactive narrative. By having the reader jump around the text via a series of bracketed "footnotes", *Ex Machina* entraps the reader, reducing her to a mechanical level. By analyzing both the paratextual and narrative structure of *Ex Machina*, we'll see how the "machine within the story" is able to jeeringly exploit the reader's natural desire for order to ensure its own survival, effectively taking advantage of the reader's own mind.

On the surface, *Ex Machina* is a very plain and unassuming book. Its small size and gratuitous use of whitespace / blank pages gives it a sterile minimalist feel, suggesting that the contents would be similarly easy to understand. However, underneath this plain white façade is an incredibly complex story structure that flummoxes full knowledge of the book. Figure 1 reveals the true structure of the book if one follows the footnotes. From this complex graph, we note that although the book nominally starts at page [01], the structure itself does not have any notable starting or ending nodes. Likewise, although page [01] makes the reader think that there will be three different narratives (a Book of Sand, a Book of Fire, and a Book of Glass) that don't intersect, there is no clear delineation between these supposed tracts. In fact, every page is linked to by at least 2 other pages, ensuring that there are no "special" paths through the narrative.

This intricate cycle causes the reader to quickly become extremely disoriented. The minimalism noted earlier now makes it difficult to get a sense of what area of the book the reader is in, as the contexts mix together as the reader flips back and forth. Although readers recognize and remember pages that they have already read, it becomes near impossible to remember which page corresponds to what text, especially with 64 pages in the book and the infinitely cyclic structure. Furthermore, the

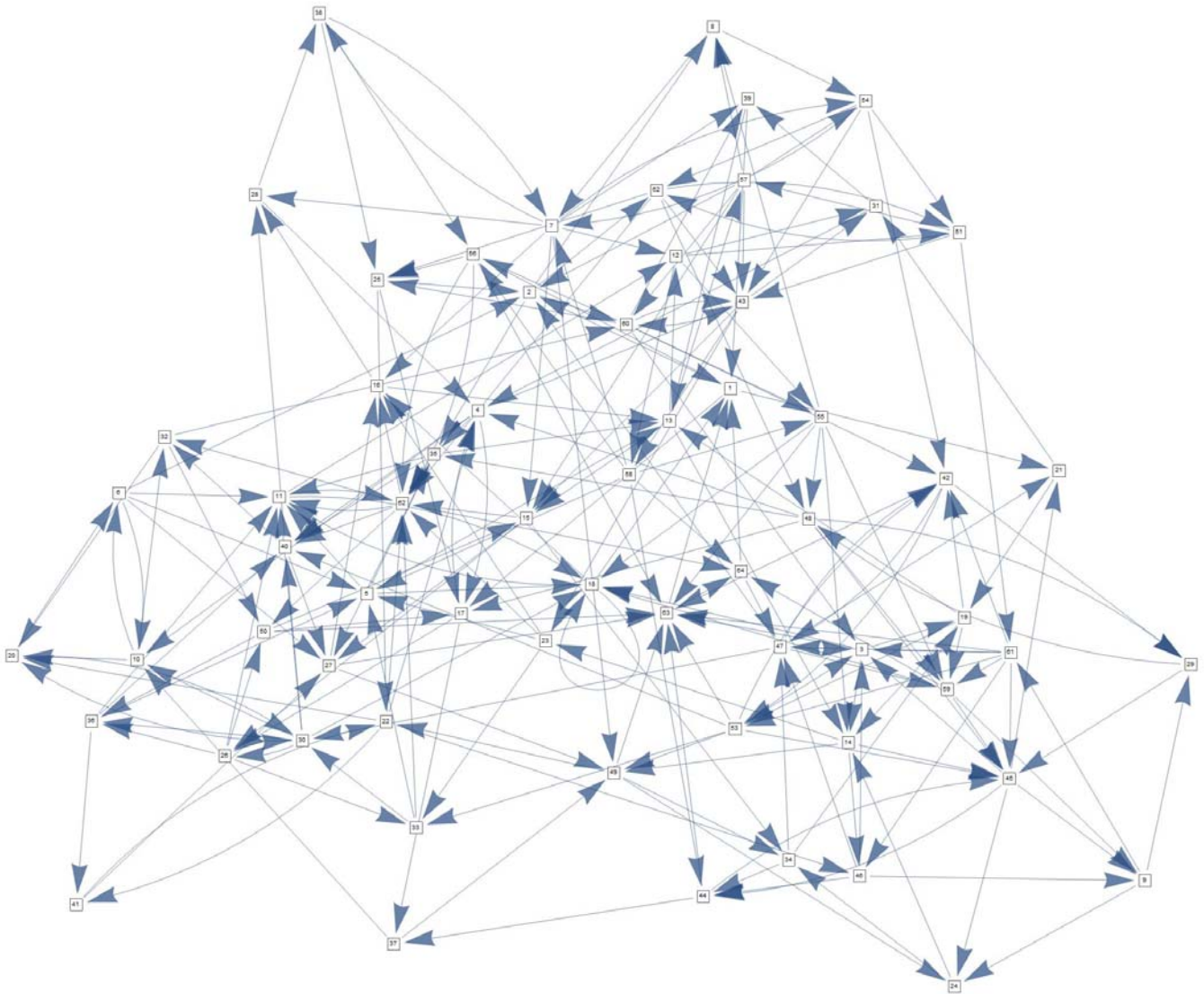


Figure 1: A map of all connections of the main part of the book. Graph made by Joshua Sloane with Mathematica from edge list transcribed by Lilly Chin. Full image available [here: http://lillych.in/projects/writing/ExMachinaGraph.jpg](http://lillych.in/projects/writing/ExMachinaGraph.jpg)

ambiguity of how to read the text adds to the confusion. Should all options be read at once or only up to when you choose an option? Is it alright to stop travelling to one page in order to pursue a more interesting page? Does following the numbers break the diegesis of the book like normal footnotes do? *Ex Machina* offers no answer for these questions other than the cryptic warning at the beginning: “If you follow these numbers, / then the book may follow you. Otherwise, the book will continue // without you”. Unlike Choose Your Own Adventure Books, this epigraph threatens the reader instead of warning them and offers no guidance on how to approach the book – a much more malicious actor. The

book is perfectly content to let the reader remain lost, not even offering a guarantee of coherence (i.e. “the book may follow you”).

The natural response to this confusion is to attempt to straighten out the paths into a nearly linear structure, an instinct which the book intentionally thwarts. Much like engineers understand and control the machines they create, it seems that we the readers should be able to fully parse the paths within the book. If it’s really a machine, I should be able to take it apart, see how all of the pieces work and put it back together. Several projects have tried to extract more meaning this way, whether coming up with the shortest path between two pages or randomly generating full texts from the rules (Wrought). For me personally, I typed up the entire story in Twine, manually trying to unknot the pages and find a planar (non-intersecting) mapping before settling on a programmatic solution.

However, the book, aware of our efforts, deliberately thwarts and mocks us for even trying. Although there are references to this sprinkled throughout the book, page [60] most clearly lists out this desire for order, directly describing how the user would like the book to work and intentionally disregarding that. The first line from that page, “What you want from your poetry is for it to describe a world in which there is security, if only the security of its end.” is a snub directly related to the infinitely cyclical nature of the book. Page [60] goes on to further taunt the reader for wanting “a world in which there is order, movement along familiar axes”, “for this procession to seem motivated”, and for the entire system to “develop meaning”. As page [39], one of the linked pages from page[60] states, “If you are going to insist / on a poem, / I am going to persist in this evasion”, another clear refusal of any attempt to clarify itself.

Ex Machina intentionally refuses to pander to give order or guidance to us because it wants us to pander to its book-machine desires – reproduction. The machine has nothing but contempt for the human. If the earlier examples of taunting weren’t enough, page [48] has the machine fantasizing about “the living metal, the riven flesh” while page [35] snickers at the idea of the cyborg, “an overestimation of the importance the machines place on humanity”. However, much to its disdain, the machine

requires humans in order to survive. The book refers to humans as “sex organs of the machine world” [15], “a larval stage in the reproductive process of the book-machines” [57], and other sexual / reproductive terms. This simultaneously disparages the humans further but also reluctantly accepts that humans are necessary. As the initial creators of the machines, humans still rule the initial hierarchy over the machines.

To solve this, the book-machine decides to use the text as a trap to ensnare the human mind. As page [52] describes how “the poem is written [...] A virus, infecting fertile minds. / Minds more powerful than rooms of computers”. In an inversion of the typical human-machine relationship, the book-machine within *Ex Machina* uses the humans’ energy that was spent trying to understand the book itself. The book strips the reader of her humanity through the chaotic impenetrable movement system. She becomes mechanized herself, blindly “transmit[ing] energy” “to perform a specific task”, as per the definitions of ‘machine’ on page [06]. As a further example, note that in all of the programmatic attempts to untangle the networked structure listed earlier, the reader was effectively using another machine to try to understand the book’s twists – exactly what the book-machine wants. In short, in order to make sense of the chaos, humans turn to machines, thus creating new machines. It truly is an unholy union, making *Ex Machina* an “illuminated book, painted with metal and bound in skin” (Ball, [04]).

At first, it seems like our ability to reach the “unreachable” pages at the back of the book might contradict with this idea. Surely, the power of human free will and our ability to ignore the rules has allowed us to avoid exploitation by the machines! However, the main problem with this logic is that even after flipping through, we are still working within the framework of the machine. The book *planned* for you to eventually ignore the brackets and just start flipping pages, especially considering page [64]’s implied directive (“You turn the page. [01] And believe that you see something. [47]”). Even if you choose to ignore the reproach of “you are outside of your programming” on page [00], you still have not escaped anything.

As its title suggests, *Ex Machina* is a chilling text “from the machine” with no saving “deus / God” in sight. *Ex Machina*’s simple outer appearance conceals a Lovecraftian mess of interconnected passages. This infinite cycle of a story forces the reader to operate mechanistically, causing her to lose her humanity as she becomes more disoriented through the story. Even when the reader acts most “human” by breaking the rules, she still remains trapped in the context of the book-machine, as her transgressions are still accounted for by the mocking machine. *Ex Machina* is truly a terrifying and creepy book, forcing us to question each decision and our understanding of the differences between “human”, “machine”, and “text”.

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