

# Faceless patrons - an augmented art installation exploring 419-fictional narratives



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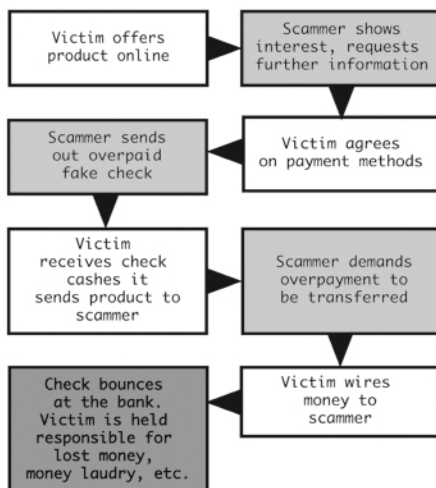
## Introduction

Scamming is a global phenomenon and victims can be found everywhere with no difference in gender, age or race. To persuade the victim into paying money upfront, the scammers create story worlds with *get rich quickly* schemes. The different narratives are situated in the grey area between reality and fiction [1]. These stories reflect the dystopian side of computer mediated communication where the Internet enables a world of false representations, abuse of trust, humiliation and desperation for opportunities.

## Material

We want to take a closer look to the *overpayment check scam* that is still largely used although digital payment methods are a common practice. In this type of scam a scammer shows interest in a product offered online by contacting the auctioneer. Once the deal is closed the scammer sends a forged check to the victim. The check is issued for far more money than agreed and the scammer convinces the victim to immediately cash the check and after deducting the costs of the product wire the rest of the money back. The scammers are using a loophole that the check transfer system affords [3]. Normally wire transfers are done within a couple of minutes, whereas it can take up to several days for the bank to refuse to honor the check with the result that the victim loses the money and additionally can be charged for money laundering.

The *overpayment check scam* lifecycle:



## Method

The story takes the form of e-mail correspondence where two characters are involved; one art patron created by the scammers and our fictional artist *Anna Masquer*. The scammers posed identity is often based on either identity theft or a confusing mix of several existing individuals, giving them the opportunity to remain faceless and anonymous. Our character *Anna Masquer* represents an average contemporary artist in her late 30s. Her story is backed up by a virtual identity presenting herself and her artwork on a Wordpress blog and a Flickr channel [2]. The crucial point for the scammer is to convince the artist why the payment can only be delivered in the form of a check-payment. In our example, a wealthy person interested in the arts wants to buy an artwork. Since he is busy with his professional job, he demands to pay by check. In an email sent to *Anna Masquer*, the patron *Mac Nuel* states:



**From:** Marc Nuel  
**To:** Anna Masquer

**Subject:** Re: Faceless

I can only prepay the total amount of this gift product by cheque payment only. This is as a result of my deployment to the gulf of Mexico since we are presently engaged in a Deep-water project at our offshore location hence I am presently not in the UK and cannot make a bank transference from this location offshore.

Tensions between the characters start to emerge when the check arrives. The scammers character starts to put pressure on our victim to receive the advance payment before the check bounces and the plot is revealed. Our character *Anna* who is a victim in disguise aims to linger and keep the correspondence up as long as possible without transferring money back to the scammer. The received checks are considered a trophy [4] and were reported to law enforcement.

## Demonstration

The installation setup consists of five photo-frames hanging on a wall. Each frame connects to a correspondence with a scammer and holds a photograph and a fake check that was received as an advance payment for *Anna Masquer's* photos. By using a smartphone or a tablet the visitor can scan each photograph via a third party AR-browser. Each physical photograph is then overlaid with an AR layer containing a video compilation of images. These images are the result of an online search in an attempt to confirm or invalidate the authenticity of the scammer's character and his online representations. This search result tries to give a face to the faceless scammer, yet fails while the posed art buyer can be anyone or no one of the persons found within the search. Additionally to the images the video contains a voiceover narrating parts of the email correspondence, enabling the visitor to follow the whole narrative paths of the *overpayment check scam* scheme.



Demonstration - Use your smartphone/tablet:

- 1.) Scan the QR code and download the AR-browser.
- 2.) Start the browser, scan the photograph in the frame.

## Conclusion & Discussion

- The art project uncovers *overpayment check scams*.
- By understanding the story structure, checks can efficiently be gathered and reported to law enforcement.
- The ongoing research on 419-fiction: testing various scamming methods to point out its info activist potential.

## Literature cited

1. Hotz-Davies, I.: Internet fictions. Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2009).
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