

Tel-Aviv University

The Lester & Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities  
The Shirley & Leslie Porter School of Cultural Studies

**“So Let It Be Written, So Let It Be Done”:   
Interactivity, Agency and New Fiction Technologies   
in the Digital Age**

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by

Shawn Edrei

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In his introduction to *Narratologies,* David Herman notes that the evolution of narrative theory from its classical/structuralist roots was not a teleological process, with each new development a net improvement over the last, but rather a reactive system in which sub-disciplines such as cognitivist narratology, rhetorical narratology and feminist narratology were generated as attempts to address perceived flaws, blind spots and gaps in existing theory. As such, it must be acknowledged that any innovations these sub-disciplines produced were initially conceived, at least in part, as responses to an established template. Likewise, the fact that the scope of narratology has expanded exponentially since the forays of esteemed critics such as Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette cannot be overlooked.

How best, then, to conduct an analysis of contemporary digital fiction, the many variants of which seem to defy existing critical theories? It cannot be denied that the ‘Digital Age’ and the technologies it has used and produced thus far have had a significant impact on the construction, reception and interpretation of narrative – but can theoretical models explicitly based on dialogue with a pre-existing template fully encapsulate the intricate devices and tools native to digital narratives? Does the common ground shared by cognitivist, rhetorical, feminist and psychoanalytical narratologies apply to texts generated and sustained by today’s technological platforms? And if not, what new understandings may be reached? This research project has provided possible answers to the above, while making (and proving) key assumptions pertaining to the presence of a lacuna in existing theory.

Digital fiction has been the subject of some critical scrutiny in recent years; H. Porter Abbott has pointed out one of its key features, interactivity, which Marie-Laure Ryan links to specific improvements in hardware and software. Here, then, is the point of contention: discussions of digital fiction, interactivity, and the narratological principles informing them tend to assume that the reader’s more active role in directing and consuming these narratives is the direct result of technological innovation. But upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the opposite holds true: the desire for interactivity, for increased diegetic and extradiegetic agency on the part of the reader, was in fact the catalyst for the creation of digital fiction in all its myriad forms. The experimentation that followed, the rapid development and refinement of different platforms through which this agency is expressed, has been fueled from inception by that initial, primary need for the destabilization of the author/reader boundary. That desire has, in turn, propelled digital fiction past the framework of critical paradigms for active readership, as those models hinge on the basic assumption that the physical text (be it written, cinematic or audial) is immutable; conversely, the desire for authorial agency and interactivity has produced a far more porous and malleable form of digital writing, problematizing any attempt to contain new phenomena within existing concepts of reader participation. Thus, a return to structuralism and classic narratology is necessary in order to re-examine foundational assumptions about the nature of textuality and authorship, as grounds for new extrapolations. These assumptions include the view of literature as an act of communication; the value of the Author (whether constructed or real) in relation to the text; the creation, projection and reception of fictional worlds; the arrangement of the narrative plot; the configuration of time and space; and the presence and deployment of actants in the text. Each of these is examined in the course of this research project, in order to determine how said components are presented and used in narratives transmitted via digital media, and to illuminate new possibilities for analytical approach.

The following briefly outlines specific narratological features and the extant theories currently used to discuss them, followed by a delineation of the three forms of digital narrative which this project uses to challenge said theories. Roman Jakobson defines the role of the addressee as limited to the deciphering of cultural, social and linguistic contexts embedded within the message, the successful decoding of which will lead to full comprehension of the addresser’s text. Harry E. Shaw notes that, for all practical intents and purposes, the same model applies to the cognitive process of consuming conventional narrative; the ‘image’ he describes is traditionally referred to as the implied author, a construct popularized by Roland Barthes in “Death of the Author”, in which Barthes advocates that authors should no longer be considered sources of absolute meaning in relation to the narratives they produce. Removing the Author’s presence from the act of reading and interpretation has a dramatic effect upon the text’s reception; in the absence of Author-as-Authority, Barthes proposes the implied author as a non-physical entity reconstructed by the reader; this entity represents the system of values embedded in the text, and facilitates the reader’s access to the fictional world contained within. This metaphorical transfer of power – the notion that the *meaning* of a text may be determined by the reader rather than the author – is a precursor to certain core principles of digital narrative, and serves as a first indicator that the desire for interactivity and agency existed long before practical applications were possible.

How does this view of communication change with the advent of contemporary technologies? The fundamental assumption laid out by Jakobson and carried forth from structuralism into subsequent branches of narrative theory is that the act of transmission is inherently unidirectional. Addressees may compose messages in reply, but this simply reverses the designations of the participants: the receiver becomes a sender, embeds the texts with their own system of codes and values, and transmits the new message. However, a subtle distinction becomes apparent in digital fiction, as the addressee now has certain tools at their disposal which enable assimilation and modification of the source text itself. This may manifest as partial control over the plot, the ability to generate simulacra of existing fictional worlds, or the substitution (partial or total) of the implied author itself, along with the application of a different value system keyed to the reader’s personal, cultural and psychological background. Moreover, the unprecedented level of access and instantaneous communication offered by the Internet blurs any remaining boundaries between author and reader: feedback to a published text may take minutes, and may subsequently facilitate immediate real-time dialogue between the two parties. These phenomena are not simply the product of new technologies which have been repurposed and adapted to serve the aforementioned functions; rather, they have been carefully crafted and refined to achieve precisely this effect, and meet a rarely-satisfied desire on the part of the recipient – one which predates material actualization by a substantial margin – to express a degree of control and agency over fictional texts.

Among other chief concerns, narratology also contributes greatly to the study of diegetic constructs contained within a given text. According to Thomas Pavel, the process of creating fictional worlds involve transferring familiar objects from consensus reality into said worlds, allowing them to coexist with objects ‘native’ to that fictional reality. Lubomir Dolezel offers a complimentary critical perspective in *Heterocosmica*, focusing on the reader’s engagement with specific cognitive processes that lead to the formation and ‘actualization’ of these diegetic realms; he also draws attention to the significant role the author plays in this process, and the lack of any need for differentiation between types of fictional worlds. Dolezel’s theoretical paradigm is complicated – but not invalidated – by the possibility of multiple texts making use of the same fictional world; Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer aretwo early examples of this practice, as they are the protagonists of separate novels yet co-exist in Mark Twain’s fictional recreation of the American South. Other texts may contain more than one fictional world. Genres of particular relevance to the study of fictional worlds include science-fiction and fantasy, as the latter regularly produces lengthy novel series which in turn provide an exhaustive portrayal of a particular diegesis, while the former’s generic formulae supports (and often encourages) exploration of multiple worlds and layers of reality.

In considering the impact new digital technologies have had (and continue to have) on the construction, reception and interpretation of fictional worlds and their contents, Dolezel’s point regarding the one feature common to all such ontological structures, regardless of author, genre or method of production, is key: the notion of lacuna, of gaps that are by necessity built into the very fabric of any fictional text. This is irrefutable when viewing pre-digital narrative platforms: the novel, the film, the television series and the theater drama are all bound by the inherent limitations of their medium with regards to length and/or duration. By contrast, John McCrae’s web serial *Worm* totals nearly two million words, and was only concluded at the author’s whim; as a purely digital space, the Internet allows for the possibility of publishing and distributing theoretically-infinite texts, precisely the mode of writing Dolezel claimed was beyond human capability. Can digital platforms therefore overcome the universal need for ontological gaps, and depict functionally-complete fictional worlds?

Any ontological analysis of a fictional text must also take into consideration the inhabitants of said text: actants and characters. According to David Gorman, narrative theory is predisposed towards studying the strategies used to populate fictional worlds. He further elaborates that the presence and participation of these actants is an essential component in any narrative. While different narratological approaches inevitably apply different lenses for the examination of characters and their roles in a given work, one common conclusion regarding actants is the static nature of their narrative function. The text itself does not and cannot change, and so interpretations of Tom Sawyer must be contained by the framework of the words Twain uses to describe him. Adaptations may take liberties with these restrictions, as seen most commonly with characters such as James Bond, Dracula or Sherlock Holmes, who have long since escaped the confines of their original narratives; but for all their contemporary elasticity, the source material still establishes basic, immutable traits that cannot be altered or rewritten. James Bond’s various incarnations will always be suave womanizers, just as Sherlock Holmes will always shun social interactions and sentiment in favor of intellectual analysis. The extent to which these traits manifest over decades of multiple adaptations may vary, but they will always remain omnipresent as core characteristics of the actants in question.

And just as digital fiction challenges the preconceived impossibility of ‘completeness’, so too does it problematize the assumption of textual permanence with regards to characterization. Digital textuality is not only limitless but transient: the content of a web page may be edited at will, with no easy access to previous versions. A character may be established in a certain fashion when a story is first published online, then be substantially rewritten or removed altogether; with each change, the text itself is altered, leaving no visible sign of revision. The closest analogy to this process is the reprinted novel or the Director’s Cut of a film, which may include updates that alter certain aspects of plot or characterization: for example, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* has been repackaged multiple times, most recently with variations that significantly alter the audience’s perception of protagonist Rick Deckard. The *Star Wars* films have also been rereleased with additional special effects layered onto them, directly impacting the visual representation of its alien landscapes. However, in such cases, the original physical object – whether textual or cinematic – still exists, and can be used as a basis for comparative analysis. Retrieving a previous version of a webpage is not nearly as simple, and assumptions of fidelity may be completely unfounded. Thus, digital narratives are by their very nature impermanent, and require further critical scrutiny to account for their fluidity.

The positioning of a narrative in time and space is highly relevant to any analysis of that world. All works of fiction share the basic requirement of taking place ‘somewhere’ and ‘somewhen’ – J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, begins in the year 3018 of the Third Age, in the realm of Middle-Earth. Mikhail Bakhtin refers to this fundamental narrative component as the chronotope, a term meant to ascribe equal importance to both time and space in determining the nature of a given diegesis. While the chronotope finds expression in any narrative, the manner of this expression changes depending on the type of story being told, and the medium through which it is being communicated to its audience. And just as common assumptions regarding the static nature of textuality are challenged by recent technological advances, so too have those same advances led to new methods of representing temporality and spatiality: for example, the virtual worlds displayed in contemporary video games use their platform’s capabilities to depict ontological designs no literary or cinematic text can fully emulate. These, in turn, have led to the development of new genres and new types of chronotopes.

Plot is another manifestation of temporality and spatiality in fiction, per E.M. Forster. While pre-digital narratives are capable of manipulating the presentation of diegetic events for artistic purposes (as seen with the film *Memento* or Martin Amis’ novel *Time’s Arrow*, in which the plot is displayed in reverse chronological order), digital fiction holds an unprecedented capacity for rewriting and rearranging narrative discourse. Fan fiction, a prolific mode of online writing, is defined in part by the granting of pseudo-authorial powers to any reader of a text; these include manipulation of the setting and the causal sequence of story events. Many modern video games work along similar lines, offering limited power to determine the order of the plot, or whether any particular event occurs at all. The mutability of plot, contrasted with supposedly iron-clad concepts such as spatiality and temporality, are further examples of the ways in which digital storytelling challenges existing paradigms.

New technologies have changed prevailing notions of narrative and their limitations, though Abbott insists that there is no need to dismiss all existing critical thought as irrelevant or outmoded. Indeed, the throughline that becomes apparent upon closer observation is precisely the consistency of the aforementioned key components: while new narrative tools have been shaped by the desire for interactivity, and currently allow innovative attempts to fulfill that desire, all digital narratives still conform to the basic requirements of communication, authorial presence, ontological structure, characterization and setting. At the same time, the advent and continuing evolution of digital media have had a clear and direct impact on those perceived limitations of narrative form and function.

As mentioned previously, this research project focuses on three modes of digital fiction, each of which makes use of a technological platform which has been molded, first and foremost, by the desire for increased interactivity with the text, as well as the need for the passive recipient (the reader/viewer/player) to express some measured form of agency during engagement with the fictional world. The first chapter discusses fan fiction, a form of storytelling which in many ways epitomizes the nature of the Internet itself by way of its hyperlinked, networked nature. The second chapter examines the medium of video games, in which the relationship between technological development and narrative experimentation is most abundantly clear, per Ryan’s belief that narratology can – and must – enter into the electronic domain. Finally, the third chapter engages in a comparison between printed superhero fiction, best exemplified via iconic characters such as Superman or Spider-Man, and their digital equivalents in webcomics, with an eye towards detailing the manner in which both forms of writing exhibit different manifestations of reflexivity and interactivity. Each mode demonstrates a different application of technology in an attempt to achieve the same objective, and each requires clear and distinct categories and theoretical models for analysis. The key to constructing these models is to bear in mind that, contrary to previous scholarly efforts in these fields, these forms of digital writing are not separate, distinct and incompatible phenomena; rather, they are all products of the same source, results of diverse experiments attempting to achieve the same ultimate goal. As such, they share much more common ground than current theories would suggest, and only by viewing these new narratives as such can greater insight be gleaned as to the nature of digital narratives, along with more informed speculation as to what may lie ahead.

After a detailed dissection of each form of digital fiction – following the application of foundational theory to the basic narrative elements contained therein – this project concludes that, as Monica Fludernik and David Herman point out, innovations and new developments in digital fiction are not the result of clean, organized and linear processes, but rather an organic array of factors simultaneously contributing over an extended period of time. It similarly deduces that the advent of digital technologies, particularly as platforms for authoring and distributing works of fiction, have led to a new set of variables that must be considered in any narratological analysis of works on said platforms. And while each of the three forms of digital fiction explored herein have been the subject of critical scrutiny – Henry Jenkins and Anne Jamison providing in-depth examinations of fan fiction both prior to and during its shift into cyberspace; George Landow and David Ciccoricco explaining the mechanics of hypertext and its increasing relevance to narrative theory; and Marie-Laure Ryan and Janet Murray broadly defining the parameters for critical engagement with virtual texts, stressing the foundational centrality of simulacra. All these have, in turn, laid the theoretical groundwork for critics such as Espen Aarseth, Bernard Wolf, J.P. Perron, Grant Tavinor and more to discuss the artistic, narrative and ludic properties of video games as complex multitextual experiences, while Richard Reynolds and Danny Fingeroth make the case for the mythical underpinnings of a long-running serial genre problematizing canonized theories on the finite nature of fictional worlds – an assertion Scott McCloud and Keith M. Booker use to demonstrate how a digital offshoot of that same medium explicitly expresses resistance to a pervasive cultural mythos, presenting set and stable narratives which nevertheless take full advantage of the Internet’s primary features.

These varied perspectives provide crucial insight into the mechanical and structural workings of these new modes, and establish certain baseline facts regarding the different influences digital technologies wield in relation to the construction, dissemination and reception of narrative. However, the singular focus of these perspectives portrays such phenomena as isolated and self-contained. In doing so, a critical factor is overlooked: these platforms are interrelated, all designed with the same impetus of actualizing pre-existing desires for authorial agency, reactivity and interactivity. In applying theories pertaining to the ideal of the ‘writerly text’ to digital literature, this research project argues that the many manifestations of the latter are in fact realizations of the former. The possibility of readers becoming writers is not a concept that emerged in the digital or immediately-pre-digital age, but rather a tradition that has been present for centuries; rather than view digital platforms as self-contained phenomena with separate narratological features and requirements, this research demonstrates the common ground shared by these new media, in that they all act as vehicles for expressions of agency on the part of the reader. They are communal experiences made available and accessible through decentralized channels; they are largely reactive in nature, frequently producing new generic rules and forms in response to extradiegetic events; and they are deeply intertextual and hyperlinked, necessitating a closer relationship between author, text and reader – a connection which further blurs the boundaries between the three. These new functions are a manifestation of our current postmodern reality, one further bolstered by the constant introduction and refinement of new media tools.

To reiterate, the question of how narratology can best accommodate these new developments is complicated by the fact that structuralism and its subsequent rival theoretical systems (contextualist, rhetorical, cognitivist and so on) are based on a common assumption that the subject of a given analysis is inherently stable: the words on the page, or the filmed scene, do not change when viewed multiple times. Different aspects of a text may be interpreted through a multitude of critical lenses, contexts and frameworks, producing different meanings and reconstructions of the fictional worlds depicted therein; but the text itself remains singular, immutable and coherent. Digital narratives confound this expectation by their very nature: works of fan fiction may be revised and erased with no trace of a previous incarnation, and may themselves become substitute source texts for further extrapolations; webcomics are similarly transient, and can be encoded with additional layers that defy textual representation (animation, sound and music, file name manipulation); video games may be experienced differently with each engagement, whether these be ludic variations such as passing a difficult challenge after multiple failures, or expressions of pseudo-authorial agency along branching plot structures, modular choice/consequence systems and determinant characters. In each instance, multiplicities of meaning are rooted not only in the act of interpretation but in the variable nature of the text itself.

This quasi-symbiotic relationship between the dissemination of new devices and their implementation in the process of creating narrative determine not only the manner in which digital narratives are delivered, but the potential content of said narratives as well. The appropriation of Web-based technologies for the establishment of fan fiction archival spaces has led to the formation of codified categories, a clearer sense of genre rules and regulations (self-policed by the fan communities themselves), and dynamic hyperlinked and hypertextual systems of exchanges, countertexts, and second-order derivations, all of which impact methods and content of fan-production. By the same token, increased sophistication of graphical engines, computer memory and data containment media (from floppy disks to CD-ROMs to DVDs to purely-digital streaming) have been driven, at least in part, by game developers striving to boost the immersive multitextual potential of their products.

As such, this project draws several conclusions from its examination of the deep reciprocal link between narrative and technology. The first is that the author, already pronounced dead by Barthes, has been fully disintegrated in the digital age, an entity whose component atoms have been absorbed and assimilated by the multitude of readers. Empowered by extant media, these readers are able to assume – to varying extents – the temporary role of a pseudo-author, generating works that do not exist in a context-less vacuum, but rather derive meaning from intertextuality and connectivity to other narratives, whether these be products of the same fan community or the simulacra’s template itself. The second conclusion is that perceived limitations on the scope of fictional worlds have, until recently, been based on the hard constraints of non-digital media such as the novel’s page length or the film’s runtime. This is no longer the case, as the theoretically-infinite depths of cyberspace can now produce what Dolezel would have deemed impossible, a complete ontological structure. Finally, one of the most essential features common to all narrative – the chrono-spatial configuration, or chronotope – has been molded into new experimental forms due to the permissive nature of the Internet as a postmodern narrative laboratory in which no legitimizing body can impose hierarchical values. At the time of writing, the emerging field of unnatural narratology has only just begun to investigate the full implications of these phenomena, how they affect our consumption of narrative, and what new permutations may arise in the near future. Led by critics such as Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson, proponents of unnatural narratology have focused on deconstructive representations of impossibility within conventional media – Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” as an example of unnatural narration, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* as a deconstruction of mimetic time, and so on. In digital and virtual textuality, unnatural narratology may find its richest, fullest expression. The underlying impetus that continues to drive both technological developments and subsequent evolutions of form and function is key to deciphering what the future holds for contemporary narrative in general and digital fiction in particular.