

## Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

### Interview with Marie-Laure Ryan

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#### ***What makes digital storytelling different than other received forms of storytelling?***

There are many forms of digital storytelling. Some very much exist, but receive little theoretical attention, such as YouTube narratives or the mostly autobiographical stories that people exchange through social media. Others receive lots of attention from literary scholars, but represent—at best—marginal forms of storytelling, such as hypertext, remixes, and the experimental texts that one finds on the Electronic Literature Organization website. Still others form the subject of endless theorization and experimentation, but do not yet exist, such as *holodeck* types of narratives—highly interactive narratives with plots generated in real time by the system as a response to the user’s actions.

The common feature of all these examples is that they all use digital technology as a medium, but they use it in many different ways, which correspond to the various conceptions of medium: as means of transmission (as does fan fiction), as means of expression (as do video game narratives), and as means of production (as do the noninteractive multimedia narratives produced in the workshops of the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley). So, I can only give an obvious answer to your question: What’s different is that digital storytelling uses computers in one way or another. But I assume that it is when it uses the digital as means of expression that one can speak of digital storytelling as something truly different from other received forms.

#### ***Admittedly, digital is a loose term that comes with some restrictive assumptions. With that being said, what encompasses the digital for you, and what particular affordances does it offer?***

My answer to the preceding question partially answers this one, but let me provide a more precise list of the possible manifestations of digital narrative: social media and blog stories, computer-dependent literary

experiments, automated text generation, video games and online worlds, interactive drama, text-based adventures, noninteractive multimedia videos, and augmented books. As far as affordances are concerned, it would be hard to deny the importance of interactivity, even though some scholars prefer the term *participation*.

But it is important to distinguish computer-specific interactivity from the kind that is represented by print-based ergodic texts. The difference lies in the fact that the computer can remember the actions of the user, and is able to adapt its responses to these actions, while the print medium cannot. The computer builds an image of the user, something that can border on surveillance and can be very irritating in nonnarrative applications, but this ability has an enormous, not yet fully explored potential for storytelling. The second most important affordance, in my view, is multimodality—a feature that is not limited to digital texts, but is much easier to implement with computers, so that many people can now tell stories using image, animation, sound, and text without elaborate training or equipment.

***Why do certain forms of storytelling seem to persist regardless of platform?***

I assume that “forms of storytelling” means *types of plots*, such as the quest narrative, the romance narrative, the love triangle, the coming-of-age narrative, the mystery story, and—more generally—the struggle between good and evil. Cognitive and evolutionary narratologists (such as Patrick Colm Hogan or Brian Boyd) will tell you that they capture universal human concerns and interpersonal relations that are fundamental to the human experience.

***What is the most exciting prospect of digital communication for you? Why? How do you see it changing in coming years?***

It is hard for me to predict how digital communication will develop in the coming years, because it has steadily defied my expectations (not just mine, but those of many theorists, especially theorists who come from the humanities). Throughout the 1990s, hypertext was hailed as the novel of the future. Where is it now? Virtual reality was supposed to replace real reality, but it is only as screen-based online worlds, not as a distinct technology, that it has impacted the lives of large numbers of people. (It may still be coming, with things like Oculus Rift head-mounted displays, but this is at least 15 years later than predicted.)

Now digital communication is much more oriented toward the real world, be it as augmented reality or as social media, than toward alternative realities. We did not see this trend coming in 2000. When Twitter was created, I thought that it would quickly die out, but everybody (except for me) seems to be busy tweeting. When tablets were introduced, I wondered who would want these things. Touch screen is so clumsy. But the public adopts eagerly every technological innovation, because technology is regarded as a toy, as a fashion item, and as a way to keep up with your friends rather than as a tool that performs useful tasks. As it changes our habits, technology changes our needs, and what was once a luxury becomes a necessity. I can see the day when it will be practically impossible to negotiate daily life without a smartphone. But I do not have enough imagination to envision the digital communication of the coming years. It would take somebody like Steve Jobs—that is, a genuine visionary with a deep understanding of the possibilities and limits of digital technology—to be able to do so.

Now if the question is redirected toward interactive digital narrative (IDN), I can tell you what I would personally like to see happen in the future. The holodeck is out of the question, at least for some time to come, because it requires an artificial intelligence equal or maybe superior to (normal) human intelligence. I also wonder whether it would be pleasurable to be an active participant in a reasonably complex plot—a plot that involves personal relations between several characters rather than the largely solitary quest of a superhero, as with most computer games. Active participation in a dramatic plot (as opposed to an epic one where the player's character mostly solves the problems that present themselves) requires constant effort, such as making decisions and thinking of meaningful things to say. This effort may be too much for the user's attention, so we need either short IDNs with intense interaction or long IDNs with light interaction.

Another problem with dramatic plots is that they depend on bad events for the characters. It may be OK to arrange bad experiences for the characters in a God game like *The Sims* because the player is detached from the characters, but if players identify strongly with their character, as they do in the holodeck scenario, then you don't want to see this character entangled in unpleasant situations. For me, the ideal interactive narrative will have a large world with many hidden surprises that I could spend hours exploring; a world that requires only light activity on my part; that would present me with interesting characters with whom I could dialogue (either through menus or voice recognition); and that would be full of little stories attached to various locations, as legends are attached to geographic features in the real world. Tasks could be given to the player, but they should not act as roadblocks; therefore, the system should give clues if the player is stuck. I imagine this world as an interactive version of *Alice in Wonderland*, for Alice is mostly an observer of interesting events in a visually appealing world that brims with invention. I can't say, however, what the global plot would be like; if I could, I would be a developer, not a theorist.

***What does a focus on the digital tend to obscure? How can students, practitioners, and scholars alike give the proper kind of attention to these issues?***

A focus on the digital can lead to an obsession with the affordances of digital technology, especially with interactivity, and to a neglect of the question: Is the exploitation of these affordances inherently desirable? Researchers tend to assume that an interactive story will be more pleasurable than a novel or film, that interactive film or TV will be an improvement over the passive kind, that a transmedia narrative is better than a monomedial story, and that a narrative that takes audience suggestions into account will be more successful than a narrative created top-down by its authors. It is time to question these assumptions and to study the responses of audiences to IDN. In fact, a recent trend in IDN research is to ask: Why do we want IDN?

***You began discussing textuality and narratology within interactive spaces many years ago. What do you see as some significant changes to the field since then? How have newer technologies influenced your thoughts on the matter?***

Since 2001, when I published *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, there hasn't been any technological breakthrough with significant consequences for narrative, though there has been a steady improvement of available resources. The closest to a new resource is the development of GPS technology and mobile

computing. This has allowed location-based narratives, but the stories that are attached to locations tend to be very traditional, neither interactive nor multimodal. There hasn't been much progress in the development of narrative intelligence, perhaps because of lack of interest and support by the entertainment industry. *Façade*, created by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern (2005), remains the only (or one of the very few) working examples of AI-based interactive drama in existence. But if we lower expectations and no longer expect the holodeck, there are quite a few successful narrative projects and low-budget independent games with a prescribed plotline and limited interactivity that charm users with interesting graphics, music, animations, memorable characters, and rich symbolism. I am thinking in particular of *Inanimate Alice* by Kate Pullinger (2005) and of *The Path* by Michael Samyn and Aureia Harvey (2009).

***To your mind, how has the concept of the implied author developed over the years, and how would you apply it to contemporary interactive technologies?***

In my work I do not distinguish an implied author from a flesh-and-blood author. The implied author is simply the real author as imagined by the user on the basis of the work. People are interested in the intent, opinions, and artistic performance of concrete individuals, not in what mysterious doubles of these individuals wanted to express. The notion of implied author makes more sense in the case of collaborative authorship, as in film or computer games, but I don't think that it is necessary to attribute the whole work to a single mind. With a film, we'll say, "The photography is great, but the dialogue is trite. The acting is OK, but the soundtrack is distracting." If a global judgment is to be made, why not admit that it is the director, a flesh-and-blood individual, who is responsible for the coordination of all the semiotic dimensions?

***How would you situate your understanding of narrativity within other discourses about meaning creation in these kinds of paces, such as transmedia?***

I view narrativity as a universal type of meaning that can be represented in many different media, though media differ from one another in their storytelling ability. For instance, it is extremely difficult to tell stories through single images, but it is not impossible. Narrativity can come in various degrees; there are texts that are strongly narrative and texts of low narrativity. The latter are much more difficult to summarize and remember. I am particularly skeptical of claims that digital technology can create new forms of narrativity, forms that are nonlinear and non-Western, because stories rely on causal chains and temporal sequence, both of which are linear. I believe that all cultures, not just Western ones, represent human experiences in terms of temporal sequence and causality.

Narrative can be nonlinear on the level of discourse, since the presentation can scramble events out of order, but if discourse is interpreted narratively, this means that the user imagines a fixed underlying logicotemporal sequence (or maybe several possible ones if the discourse is ambiguous, but this is multilinearity, not nonlinearity). Narrative, however, is only one possible form of representation, and there could be other forms of meaning creation that are better suited to digital technology. Look at the texts gathered in the two collections of the Electronic Literature Organization. All of them take advantage of the affordances of digital technology in one way or another, but only a few tell stories that can be

remembered. The digital may be more a medium for poetry than a narrative medium. As for transmedia, I rather suspect that it exists only with a narrative mode of representation, because all the media involved must refer to the same story world, and of course there cannot be a story world without some kind of story. (Note that transmedia is not the same thing as multimodality, which can easily be used for poetry.)

***How can story worlds develop over multiple platforms? What are some of the hallmarks of narrative structures that can be successful, popular, or engaging in this way?***

If you read the many guides to transmedia writing, you will notice that they all say to create a compelling world, but they don't say how. Beyond that, they give some standard advice (create sequels and prequels, present the story world from a different point of view, tell the story of secondary characters, give the user something to do), but there is no recipe for writing for transmedia, and, in fact, I wonder if it can really be done. One can write a story for print, or film, or video game, but one does not write an episode of a story for film, then an episode for print, then an episode that is realized as game. Each participating medium must be reasonably self-sufficient. Still, one can make some observations on the transmedia potential of story worlds on the basis of existing transmedia systems.

For a story world to develop successfully over multiple platforms, it must foreground the quality of invention at the expense of the quality of accurate observation. It is symptomatic of this condition that there is a Tolkien-based transmedia empire, but no Proust- or Faulkner-based ones, even though these authors created very rich and coherent story worlds. Look at the narratives that gave rise to large transmedia franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings*: They all have fantastic or science fiction story worlds, which means worlds that are very distant from everyday reality. Their original authors imagined these worlds in great detail, and this inspired other authors to add even more details, because it is easier for the imagination to start from something concrete than to create ex nihilo.

This is why fan fiction that builds on preexisting story worlds is so popular with amateur writers: It's easier to expand or revise than to invent! Another reason for the preference of transmedia franchises for the fantastic and science fiction is the visual appeal of these genres. A story world that induces mental visualizations is easy to adapt to a visual medium such as film or video games. And finally, the story worlds that expand over many media tend to be those that appeal to juvenile audiences. It is mostly young people who play video games, who collect action figures and comics, and who flock to the newest installment of a film series together with all their friends.

For me, transmedia storytelling is much more a marketing strategy and a social phenomenon than a genuine artistic mode, because very few stories are "born" transmedia. Most franchises exploit the popular success of a narrative that was conceived for a single medium, be it film (*Star Wars*), computer game (*Halo*), or most frequently a novel. The only born-transmedia narratives that I know of are experimental projects that weren't popular successes, such as *Alpha 0.7* and *About Kate* produced by state-controlled German television networks.

***In your recent work, you discuss various applications of ritual within narrative. How significant are ritual practices to creating meaningful stories in digital spaces? Has a greater consideration of ritual influenced the way you view storytelling generally?***

In my book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), I discuss ritual as an example of a participatory activity that presents a narrative structure, and I present it as a model for the problematic combination of narrative, immersivity, and interactivity. I also describe an interactive virtual reality installation by Brenda Laurel, *Placeholder*, which tries to convey a sense of the sacred by having users adopt the body and way of seeing the world of four creatures inspired by Native American mythology: Spider, Snake, Fish, and Crow.

The relations between narrative and ritual can be either metaphorical (ritual is like narrative in its universality among human cultures, in its need for interpretation, in its temporal unfolding) or metonymic-literal. Reciting stories can be part of a ritual; ritual may enact a mythical narrative; or ritual may inspire stories that explain why it is being performed. It is in the sense of enacting a story that I see the most promising relation between ritual and IDN, since participants in certain types of IDN, especially games, impersonate characters. The visual affordances of digital media are also particularly well suited to represent a magical world inhabited by mythical creatures.

But I do not believe that the imitation of existing ritual practices can be a viable model for IDN because a ritual's efficiency depends on the exact repetition of a scripted sequence of events and leaves no room for choice, while choice—and some amount of variability—is essential to interactive digital narrative, be it hypertext, computer games, or interactive drama.

### References

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