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Interactive Digital Narrative – What's the Story?

Hartmut Koenitz / Gabriele Ferri / Mads Haahr / Digdem Sezen / Tonguc Ibrahim Sezen (Eds.): *Interactive Digital Narrative: History, Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge 2015 (= Routledge Studies in European Communication Research and Design 7). 286 pp. GPB 90.00. ISBN 978-1-138-78239-6

Introduction

For over 25 years, new and experimental forms of narrative have been evolving from the intersection of digital technologies and literary and artistic vision. From hypertext novels, to massive multi-player online role-playing games to immersive virtual reality installations, each instance involves storytelling machines – human or otherwise – that reveal as much about ourselves as the tales they tell. The collection of essays *Interactive Digital Narrative: History, Theory and Practice*, edited by Hartmut Koenitz et al., gathers a highly diverse range of activities and experiences in the field of interactive digital narrative (IDN) that describe its different facets and also reveal dramatic tensions within this research area. In his foreword, Nick Montfort observes a field still "in the process of coalescing" (p. ix) evident in the variety of contributions to this book reflecting individual practitioner / author experiences, multidisciplinary debates and boundary breaking technical revolutions that characterise IDN. The volume serves as a useful introduction for those new to IDN but perhaps even more as a route into key issues for those more familiar with it. By mixing work from seminal theorists in the field with seasoned creative practitioners, and exploring many examples of IDN, it fulfils its aim of providing a snapshot of the status quo in research while compelling readers to debate its future.

The book builds on previous work by the editors presented over the last decade at Interactive Storytelling (ICIDS) and Digital Games (DIGRA) conferences. However, this collection, published in association with the European communications research association (ECREA), opens up IDN research and practice to a wider audience of media and communications scholars and associated fields from cultural theory to narratology to creative arts practice.

Structuring IDN research

The book presents 17 essays across three sections – history, theory and practice – which provide an accessible introduction to IDN both as an academic field and a genre of cultural production. However, these three areas also represent challenges for IDN: What is its history and how does it make itself distinct from other genres? Which theoretical framework is appropriate, bearing in mind its antecedents and desire to differentiate itself?

The history of IDN reflects 25 years of rapid technological change problematised by the tensions between technological determinism and social construction of the technologies involved in producing interactive digital narratives. Have the rapidly changing platforms and structures of digital media shaped the narratives being produced and consumed? Has IDN been able to evolve at a pace that allows for reflection and critique where researchers and producers benefit from accumulated knowledge and expertise in narrative creation? The first two essays in the book coolly illustrate the histories of two very different progenitors of IDN, hypertext fiction (by Scott Rettberg) and interactive cinema (by Chris Hales), as providing the basis for experimentation in narrative structure and reception that accelerated with the advance of digital media. However, in the third essay, Noam Knoller and Udie Ben-Arie argue more heatedly that the advance through different contextual 'dispositifs' has undermined relations between author and audience, offering a dystopian view of what ubiquitous and pervasive media could do to narrative structure.

This conflictive vision for the future sets the tone for an unsettled tour through the 'theory' and 'practice' sections in the rest of the book. Indeed, the three-strand outline belies the fact that several essays successfully mix perspectives. For example, prominent narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan merges history and theory in a useful analysis of how space and place are experienced differently in digital and non-IDN narratives, while Mads Haahr offers a history of practice in a highly pragmatic account of location-based media. Like the subject of IDN itself, the book structure allows for and rewards non-linear reading, encouraging readers to follow threads that link contributions in one section to another. For example, Rettberg's two contributions to the 'history' and 'practice' sections read as a complementary pair outlining a chronological account of hypertext fictional genres but also revealing a self-conscious literary form where IDN 'authors' experiment with structures that depict and comment on the unfolding history of IDN at the same time.

Computational and dramatic tension

In their highly useful section introductions, the editors repeatedly acknowledge that developing a shared theoretical approach to IDN is 'difficult', especially in a multidisciplinary field where artificial intelligence (AI) is as influential as aes-

thetics and literary narratology. From a narratological perspective, this is particularly notable in the diverse ways in which key concepts such as 'text', 'character', 'author', 'audience' and so on, are discussed in relation to IDN by different contributors.

The processing power now available along with algorithmic approaches to social relations allow for vast amounts of data to be incorporated into IDN, which produce endless possibilities for character action and interaction. But computational sophistication does not automatically produce characters of interest. Janet Murray, a seminal IDN theorist, laments the "mismatch between computational abstraction and dramatic abstraction", in her chapter "A Tale of Two Boyfriends: A Literary Abstraction Strategy for Creating Meaningful Character Variation" (Chapter 8). She suggests that instead of characters becoming 'over-specified' and 'under-dramatised', we should look to the narrative genre of animation, which exaggerates and looks for 'durable abstractions' that over time have successfully produced characters of dramatic interest.

Murray's essay reads as a call for a feminist approach to character development in narrative, albeit with minimal focus on the digital in particular. She reframes classic narratives and their structural analysis from the point of view of the female. Instead of fairy tales and hero quests (a product of a patriarchal culture) the same narratives are read as dramatic choices presented by character variations, particularly in the relationships between male and female or between the female and a variety of 'potential boyfriends'. Murray revisits her earlier W2P framework ('woman with 2 potential partners', see Murray 2011) where the BOG ('boyfriend of obligation') and BOD ('boyfriend of desire') are positioned as binary opposites with attributes that present dramatic options for narrative – which she posits as particularly useful for dynamic interactive structures. She deftly sketches how such attributes link to key dramatic actions across a variety of narratives including the *Iliad, Pride and Prejudice* and *The Good Wife*. While making limited reference to examples of IDN, the structure clearly offers a strategy for narrative analysis and development. Her essay serves to remind us that all narrative, whether text, digital or deeply interactive remains culturally constrained. Technology has liberated narrative ideas from platform constraints and expanded the possibilities of storytelling, but technology itself and its uses are situated in an ecology of experience, values, ethics and sensemaking (McCarthy and Wright 2004). This is especially the case if we continue to apply anachronistic and patriarchal narratological analytical approaches. Murray offers her framework as a route to better understanding of character development in IDN. However, as Rettberg notes in Chapter 2, can IDN authors really slowly develop and reveal characters in a narrative "that can be read in thousands of possible orders"?

Infinite narratives in search of a theory

In Chapter 5, "Narrative Structures in IDN Authoring and Analysis", Gabriele Ferri examines the challenge of applying literary narratological approaches – structuralist, poststructuralist, neo-Aristotelian, Greimasian – to narratives with interactivity, multilinearity and agency. By conceptualising IDN as interactive *matrices* or "semiotic devices for the creation of a multiplicity of single textual outcomes", he offers a useful approach to narrative structural analysis for IDNs, based on "a broad textuality, narrativity and a plurality of flexible narrative schemata" (p. 89).

Sandy Louchart, John Truesdale, Neil Suttie and Ruth Aylett's essay on 'Emergent Narrative' (Chapter 12) presents a good if somewhat technical overview of structural possibilities within particular software arrangements for this approach. Like other contributions, this consolidates previous work by the authors and affirms the role of the book in capturing the status quo of IDN research. Another effect of this amalgamation of research, however, is a proliferation of acronyms for proposed theoretical and conceptual approaches. The book may have benefitted from a glossary in order to assist readers in distinguishing technical standards from descriptive conceptual terms.

Koenitz builds on previous work on a theoretical framework for IDN, directly targeting how narrative theory and narratology should address IDN and vice versa, in his chapter "Towards a Specific Theory of Interactive Digital Narrative" (Chapter 6). The central argument is that 'legacy-derived' theory and terminology from drama and literature is anachronistic and technically inappropriate for IDN. Koenitz argues for a new higher-level framework that avoids terms like 'story' or 'plot' in favour of viewing IDN as a combination of myriad instantiations of *system, process* and *product*. He correctly observes the difficulties in applying legacy narrative theory to IDN and his replacement terminology certainly allows for wider interpretation and inclusion of more potential objects of analysis. However, here as in other parts of the book, the purpose of narrative analysis is not quite clear, nor is the context in which legacy theory arises. For instance, do IDN researchers want to formally develop a theory of IDN in order to describe it, to extend its academic value, to compare genres within IDN or to non-IDN narratives, or to develop tools for critical appraisal? Indeed, the latter issue of critique is addressed in discussions taking place on the book's companion website – www.gamesandnarrative.net – where questions arise as to how well IDN researchers and practitioners understand their audience or include any measure of reception in research. Further development of companion resources on this website would be of benefit to readers new to IDN and to the extension of this debate.

Defining the Audience / User and Author / Designer

Many essays offer detailed examinations of individual IDN titles in terms of their contribution as *texts* – and as *experiments* in research and development – to the field of IDN in theory. For example *Façade* (Mates and Stern 2005) is addressed by many authors and described as a "canonical example of IDN" (Knoller and Ben-Arie, p. 56) and "groundbreaking" (Louchart et al., p. 185). However, there is little discussion in general of reception or of first hand user experience of IDNs. In his analysis of the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in IDN, Szilas acknowledges that one of the main problems in research is that the user experience is "largely unknown" (p. 137), revealing in his use of the term 'user' a core tension between the differing computing and humanities views of IDN reception throughout the volume. He argues cogently for a truly inter-disciplinary approach to IDN, which while "incompatible with academic or-ganisation" (p. 146) is required to address this problem. In their 'Introduction' to the IDN Practice section, the book editors suggest that interactive web documentaries, particularly in the areas of news and current affairs with a social dimension – e.g. *Fort McMoney* (Dufresne 2014) cited by several contributors to the volume – appear to have more refined goals for communication and clearly defined experience for users / participants which is where successful narratives will emerge. However, Sezen's provocative essay on 'videogame poetry' is most distinctive for taking care to record the reception and critical appraisal of digi-tal poetry, game poems and other forms offered in her meta-analysis. She ob-serves that successful examples such as *Today I Die* (Benmergui 2009) and *Pas-sage* (Rohrer 2007) won praise for following "a proceduralist approach with clear narrative aspects" (p. 237), i.e. that they lend themselves to narratological analysis. Her analysis suggests that the authors / designers had very clear inten-tions as to the message or metaphor intended and the participant / player ex-perience. And as noted by Chew and Mitchell (2015), for interactive narrative the audience / reader is essential, as "without his / her constant involvement, the story cannot be told".

Yet, if IDN narrative is that which changes according to user input ac-cording to the editors, can a structure even be considered 'fixed' or 'authored' enough for narratological analysis? One of the most satisfying essays in the collection, of particular use for IDN practitioners, is Ulrike Spierling's "Inter-action Design Principles as Narrative Techniques for Interactive Digital Story-telling" (Chapter 10), her account of why and how IDN needs to broaden its perspective on and take principles and methods from interactive design for other digital media interfaces with which it shares many features. She notes that the interface was for "too long" neglected as a core aspect of narrative authoring (p. 171), calling for a broader conceptualisation of and support for the 'author' in interactive narrative to take into account design. Crucially, she recognises the binary role of audiences both as participants of story worlds, with narrative requirements and as users with interface design needs. Digital

arts practitioner and theorist Martin Rieser further celebrates the potential in IDN for producing *new* audiences, particularly with developments in mobile and ubiquitous media. His analysis of "Artistic Explorations" (Chapter 16) in augmented reality narratives in 'uncanny' spaces provides a positive counterpoint to the dystopian fears expressed in earlier essays on the pressures of technological evolution. However, this contrast between the promise and threat of rapid technological development for IDN arises across the entire collection of essays, echoing similar discourses in digital media generally.

Conclusion

In many ways the book provokes more questions than it answers, but this reflects its value as a timely snapshot of a shape shifting field where artistic and entertainment practice and scholarly inquiry retain a healthy antagonism towards each other. The collection provides a useful starting point for anyone seeking to understand the breadth and multidisciplinarity of the field of IDN, although it is possibly of greater benefit to those closer to the field in identifying fruitful directions for future research.

At a recent conference on interactive storytelling, one of the editors, Hartmut Koenitz, enumerated five 'theses' that interactive digital narrative research needs to address: 1) a new narratology to suit IDN, 2) interoperability or standardisation in systems for its production and distribution, 3) sustainability (so many older works cited in the canon of IDN are no longer available), 4) a renewed focus on authors and 5) greater acknowledgement of the user experience (cf. Koenitz 2014). While this book does not address these issues directly, each essay engages with one or more of them from a variety of multidisciplinary perspectives, and clearly illustrates why all are still under debate in this 'coalescing' field.

IDN has been well served by an active group of researchers and practitioners through various conferences and associated publications, represented by many of the contributors to this book. Its publication in a European Communication Research and Education (ECREA) series formally introduces it to a new interdisciplinary audience, which will no doubt increase the visibility of IDN research among researchers with different perspectives. This can only be of benefit both to IDN and to media research in general which will benefit from the insights into the new and challenging forms of communication offered by this volume of essays. The future of IDN research and practice is on a surer footing with its publication.

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