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2000-03-29

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17347>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Ryan, Marie-Laure: Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media – Quotes from the Introduction. In: *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*. Nr. 10, Jg. 2 (2000-03-29), Nr. 3, S. 1–5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17347>.

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# Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media – Quotes from the Introduction\*

By Marie-Laure Ryan

No. 10 – 29.03.2000

-> VR [virtual reality] has been defined as an "interactive, immersive experience generated by a computer" (Pimentel and Texeira, 11). As a literary theorist, I am primarily interested in the two dimensions of the VR experience as a novel way to describe the types of reader response that may be elicited by a literary text of either the print or the electronic variety. I propose therefore to transfer the two concepts of immersion and interactivity from the technological to the literary domain and to develop them into the cornerstones of a phenomenology of reading, or more broadly of art experiencing. In the course of this investigation we will visit both traditional literary texts and the new genres made possible by the digital revolution of the past two decades, such as hypertext, art CD ROMs, synchronic role-playing games (MOOs), the largely virtual genre of interactive drama and its embryonic implementations in electronic installation art. My purpose will be twofold: to revisit print literature, more specifically the narrative kind, in terms of the concepts popularized by digital culture, and conversely to explore the fate of traditional narrative patterns in digital culture.

-> In the literary domain, no less than in the visual arts, the rise and fall of immersive ideals are tied to the fortunes of an aesthetics of illusion, which implies transparency of the medium. The narrative style of the eighteenth century maintained an ambiguous stance toward immersion: on one hand, it cultivated illusionist effects by simulating nonfictional narrative modes (memoirs, letters, autobiographies), on the other it held immersion in check through a playful, intrusive narrative style that directed attention back and forth from the story told to the storytelling act. The visibility of language acted as a barrier that prevented readers from losing themselves in the storyworld.

The aesthetics of the nineteenth century novel tipped this balance in favor of the storyworld. Through techniques that are examined in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5 of this book, high realism effaced the narrator and the narrative act,

penetrated the mind of characters, transported the reader into a virtual body located on the scene of the action, and turned her into the direct witness of events, both mental and physical, that seemed to be telling themselves. Readers not only developed strong emotional ties to the characters, they were held in constant suspense by the development of the plot. The immersive quality of nineteenth century narrative techniques appealed to such a wide segment of the public that there was no sharp distinction between "popular" and "high" literature: wide strata of society wept for Little Nell or waited anxiously for the next installment of Dickens' serial novels.

The rest of the story has been told many times: how literature, cross-fertilized with the New Criticism, structuralism and deconstruction, took a "linguistic turn" in the mid twentieth century, privileged form over content, emphasized spatial relations between words, puns, intertextual allusion, parody and self-referentiality; how the novel subverted plot and character, experimented with open structures and permutations, turned into an increasingly cerebral word play, or became indistinguishable from lyrical prose. This evolution split literature into an intellectual avant-garde committed to the new aesthetics and a popular branch that remained faithful to the immersive ideals and narrative techniques of the nineteenth century. (Ironically, the high branch turned out to be heavily dependent on the resources of the low branch for its game of parody.) As happened in the visual arts, immersion was brought down by a playful attitude toward the medium, which meant in this case the exploitation of such features as the phonic substance of words, their graphic appearance, and the clusters of related or unrelated senses that make up their semantic value field. In this carnivalesque conception of language, meaning is no longer the stable image of a world in which the reader projects a virtual alter ego, nor even the dynamic simulation of a world in time, but the sparks generated by associative chains that connect the particles of a textual and intertextual field of energies into ever changing configurations. Meaning came to be described as unstable, decentered, multiple, fluid, emergent-all concepts that have become hallmarks of postmodern thought.

-> In hypertext, the prototypical form of interactive textuality (though by no means the most interactive), the reader determines the unfolding of the text by clicking on certain areas, the so-called hyperlinks, that bring to the screen other segments of text. Since every segment contains several such hyperlinks, every reading produces a different text, if by text one understands a particular set and sequence of signs scanned by the reader's eye. Whereas the reader of a standard print text constructs personalized interpretations out of an invariant semiotic base, the reader of an interactive text thus participates in the construction of the text as a visible display of signs. Although this process is restricted to a choice among a limited number of well-charted alternatives, namely the branching possibilities designed by the author,

this relative freedom has been hailed as an allegory of the vastly more creative and less constrained activity of reading as meaning formation

-> While hypertext can bring together the heterogeneous, it can also break apart elements traditionally thought to belong together. The dismantling effect of hypertext is one more way to pursue the typically postmodern challenge of the epistemologically suspect coherence, rationality and closure of narrative structures, one more way to deny the reader the satisfaction of a totalizing interpretation. Hypertext thus becomes the metaphor for a Lyotardian "postmodern condition" in which grand narratives have been replaced by "little stories," or perhaps by no stories at all—just by a discourse reveling in the Derridean performance of an endless deferral of signification. Through its growth in all directions, hypertext implements one of the favorite notions of postmodernism, the conceptual structure that Deleuze and Guattari call a *rhizome*. In a rhizomatic organization, in opposition to the hierarchical tree structures of rhetorical argumentation, the imagination is not constrained by the need to prove a point or to progress toward a goal, and the writer never needs to sacrifice those bursts of inspiration that cannot be integrated into a linear argument.

-> To the skeptical observer, the accession of the reader to the role of writer (or "wreader," as some agnostics facetiously call the new role) is a self-serving metaphor that presents hypertext as a magic elixir: "Read me, and you will receive the gift of literary creativity." If taken literally—but who really does so?—the idea would reduce writing to summoning words to the screen through an activity as easy as one, two, three, click. Under these conditions, no writer would ever suffer from the agony of the blank page. Call this writing if you want; but if working one's way through the maze of an interactive text is suddenly called writing, we will need a new word for retrieving words from one's mind to encode meanings, and the difference with reading will remain. One wonders what conclusions would have been drawn about the political significance of hypertext and the concept of reader-author if the above-mentioned critics had focused on the idea of *following* links, or on the limitation of the reader's movements to the paths designed by the author. Perhaps they would have been more inclined to admit that aesthetic pleasure (like political harmony) is a matter of unbridled license but of controlled freedom.

-> The cause of immersion has not been helped by its resistance to theorization. Contemporary culture values those ideas that produce brilliant critical performances, that allow the critic to deconstruct the text and put it back together again in the most surprising configurations, but what can be said about immersion in a textual world except that it takes place? The self-explanatory character of the concept is easily interpreted as evidence that immersion promotes a passive attitude in the reader, similar to the entrapment of tourists in the self-enclosed virtual realities of theme parks or vacation resorts. [...] As for the allegedly passive character of the experience, we need only to be reminded of the complex mental

activity that goes into the production of a vivid mental picture of a textual world. Since language does not offer input to the senses, all sensory data must be simulated by the imagination. [...] we must dream up textual worlds with "minute integrity" to conjure up the intense experience of presence that inserts them into imaginative reality. Is this the trademark of a passive reader?

-> To counter these two trends it will be necessary to take a more critical look at interactivity, and a more sympathetic one at immersion. This attitude is admittedly no less biased than the approaches that I want to avoid, but it offers an alternative to both the rapturous celebrations of digital literature and the Luddite laments for the book that have greeted the recent explosion of information technologies. If I appear harsher on interactive than on immersive texts, it is not because I view the intrusion of the computer into literary territory as a threat to humanistic values, as does Sven Birkerts, the most eloquent champion of immersion, but because interactivity is still in an experimental stage, while literature has already perfected the art of immersive world construction. It is precisely its experimental nature that makes interactivity fascinating. I am not interested in the device as a ready-made message-in-the-medium, as its postmodern advocates read it, but as a language and as a design problem whose solutions will always be in the making. In my discussion of interactivity I therefore avoid allegorical readings, and concentrate instead on the expressive properties of the feature, its potential and limitations, its control of the reader, and its problematic relation to immersion.

-> The organization of this book grew out of the very definition that inspired the whole project: "virtual reality is an immersive, interactive experience generated by a computer." We will begin by visiting the virtual as philosophical concept, move on to VR as technology, explore its two components, immersion and interactivity, and we will conclude this itinerary by considering what is for me the ultimate goal of art: the synthesis of immersion and interactivity. This book, then, is as much about virtual literature-literature that could be-as about the actual brand.

-> Even when narrative coherence is maintained, though, immersion remains an elusive experience in interactive texts. In the last two chapters, I argue that the marriage of immersion and interactivity requires the imagined or physical presence of the appreciator's body in the virtual world, a condition easily satisfied in a VR system but problematic in hypertext because every time the reader is asked to make a choice she assumes an external perspective on the worlds of the textual universe. In VR, we act within a world, and experience it from the inside, but in interactive texts of the selective variety, we choose a world, more or less blindly, out of many alternatives, and we are not imaginatively committed to anyone of them, because the interest of branching texts lies in the multiplicity of paths, not in any particular development.

-> But why should the synthesis of immersion and interactivity matter so much for aesthetic philosophy ? In its literal sense, immersion is a corporeal experience, and as I have hinted above, it takes the projection of a virtual body, or even better, the participation of the actual one to feel integrated in an artworld. On the other hand, if interactivity is conceived as the appreciator's engagement in a play of signification that takes place on the level of signs rather than things and of words rather than worlds, it is a purely cerebral involvement with the text that downplays emotions, curiosity for what will happen next, and the resonance of the text with personal memories of places and people. On the shiny surface of signs-the signifier-there is no room for bodies of either the actual or the virtual variety. But the recipient of total art, if we dare to dream such a thing, should be no less than the subject as Ignatius de Loyola defined it: an "indivisible compound" of mind and body. What is at stake in the synthesis of immersion and interactivity is therefore nothing less than the participation of the whole of the individual in the artistic experience.

\*Excerpted from *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* by Marie-Laure Ryan forthcoming from The Johns Hopkins University Press in December 2000. © 2001 by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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