Editor's Column: Transmedial Narratology and Transdisciplinarity

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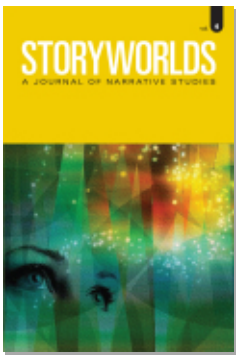

StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies, Volume 4, 2012, pp. vii-xii (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: 10.1353/stw.2012.0005

Editor's Column

Transmedial Narratology and Transdisciplinarity

In parallel with previous issues of the journal, *Storyworlds* 4 features essays that explore storytelling practices across a range of media, from interactive digital fiction and conversational storytelling to literature in print and the word-image combinations used in comics and graphic novels. Hence the essays included in this issue continue to engage with questions that, crucially important for contemporary narrative studies, define the journal's scholarly brief: What constraints and affordances do particular storytelling media bring to the process of building narrative worlds? What tools are needed to characterize, in all its richness and complexity, the experience of inhabiting a narrative world in a given medium or across different media? More than this, however, the present issue suggests how theorists of narrative can contribute to—and not just borrow from—research cutting across traditional disciplinary boundaries. Thus, as I discuss at the end of this column, it is time to take stock of how scholars of story can help co-fashion what might be termed transdisciplinary frameworks of inquiry. At issue are investigative frameworks needed for phenomena that are by their nature situated at the intersection of multiple fields of study.

Nick Davis's lead-off essay revisits the issue of narrativity, probing what remains one of the central questions of narrative theory: "When does a flow of information become a narrative?" To address this question, Davis reconsiders the narratological distinction between story (or what is presented in a narrative) and discourse (or how that basic story material is presented); he also reassesses Monika Fludernik's influential—and controversial—argument that experientiality rather than plot should be taken as the core constituent of stories. Davis then recontextualizes these and other recent approaches to the problem of narrativity by returning to one of the foundational texts in Western discourse on narrative, Aristotle's *Poetics*. Extrapolating from Aristotle's account, Davis discusses two ways of thinking about what a narrative is, or rather two ways of engaging with narrative performances. On the one hand, narratives are encountered as unified and interconnected; on the other hand, engaging with a story entails "a certain fracturing of wholeness." Concluding his essay with a survey of several "tropes of narrativity" that are sometimes (self-reflexively) embedded in narrative texts, Davis uses these tropes to suggest how the two complementary ways of organizing a flow of information as a narrative can be linked, in turn, to two basic polarities of experience: experience as unitary or holistic versus experience as "fragmentary, unstable, perforated, syncopated, or otherwise resistant to uniform conceptualization."

The next three essays form something of a cluster. Daniel Punday's discussion of narration, intrigue, and reader positioning in electronic narratives complements Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell's study of how second-person narration structures the interplay between text and reader in digital fiction. Meanwhile, Jarmila Mildorf compares the forms and functions of *you*-narration in literary and conversational settings, further underscoring one of the key emphases of Ensslin and Bell's essay: namely, the need to develop new tools for studying narrative *you* across different storytelling media.

Working to formulate a richer language for discussing how electronic or computer-mediated narratives invite modes of reader response, Punday draws on Espen Aarseth's concept of "intrigue" (which involves the creation of a problem to be solved or an enigma to be explored) to rethink previous accounts of reader positioning—accounts developed

by narratologists on the basis of print narratives. Punday uses a range of case studies, including hypertext fictions, a text adventure game, and a narrativized electronic poem, to argue that "intrigue is a structure implicit in almost all electronic narratives and . . . complements rather than replaces the narration *also* found in these texts." In this way Punday not only reassesses concepts such as the narratee and the implied reader but also outlines an innovative strategy for reconciling in a single textual system or economy the two profiles exhibited by many digital works: text as narrative, text as game. Ensslin and Bell also reexamine concepts and models geared toward print narratives, arguing that "the narratological tools and terminologies inherited from print scholarship need to be adapted to the medial, material, and discursive qualities of digital fiction." Focusing on geniwate and Deena Larsen's Flash fiction *The Princess Murderer* as their case study, Ensslin and Bell explore uses of second-person narration in interactive digital fiction. More specifically, they study the metafictional potential of narrative *you* in digital environments, examining how in works such as *The Princess Murderer* second-person narration prompts readers to reflect on their own modes of engagement with the text at hand—and hence to reconsider their more or less habitual ways of engaging with other texts circulating in a culture or subculture. Mildorf likewise focuses on the variable distribution and effects of narrative *you* across different storytelling environments. Juxtaposing Joyce Carol Oates's 1970 short fiction "You" and an extract from an interview conducted by a father and son in the context of the *StoryCorps* oral history project, Mildorf explores how differences in genre as well as medium bear on the deployment (and interpretation) of *you*-narration. In the process she maps out productive new directions for research at the interface between sociolinguistic narrative analysis and literary narratology.

In the final two essays of the issue, Amit Marcus and Howard Sklar chart still other pathways for research on storytelling practices. Using Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go* as an example text, Marcus demonstrates how two approaches to narrative inquiry that have developed largely separately up to now—possible-worlds approaches and approaches centering on narrative ethics—can both benefit from being brought into dialogue with one another. More specifically, Mar-

cus shows how the concept of "modalities" originating from possible-worlds approaches can be leveraged for ethically oriented analyses of stories and storytelling, even as recent work on empathy and the respect for otherness in narrative contexts exposes limits to the descriptive and explanatory power of the possible-worlds framework. For his part, Sklar highlights the relevance of transmedial narratology for another emergent area of inquiry: disability studies. Detailing some of the practical challenges and potential ethical problems of eliciting life stories from the intellectually disabled, Sklar's essay pilots a method for encouraging members of this population to use the format of comics storytelling to narrate their experiences—that is, to encapsulate key events in panels like those found in comics and graphic novels. Outlining specific questions or tasks that can be used to elicit different versions of events in graphic-narrative form, Sklar thereby suggests how comics storytelling may constitute a mode of narrative empowerment for intellectually disabled persons. As Sklar puts it,

> Self-produced graphic narratives provide the intellectually disabled with the means to read, reread, discuss, and even revise their life stories by resequencing or redrawing existing panels or by inserting new panels as new discoveries are made, memories are retrieved, or more recent events are added to the sequence.

I return now to the idea of transdisciplinarity mentioned at the beginning of this column. Pekka Tammi (2006) notes that an emphasis on interdisciplinary research has become de rigueur in the field of narrative studies (19–21). But the essays in the present issue can be used to point up a different concept: not *inter*disciplinarity but rather *trans*disciplinarity. The goal of what I am calling transdisciplinary research is to avoid the kind of unidirectional borrowing that, though commonly conflated with interdisciplinarity, in fact undermines efforts to foster genuine dialogue and exchange across fields of study (see Sternberg 2003). Hence scholars of narrative need to move beyond adapting ideas incubated in other disciplines. Narrative specialists should instead aim to co-fashion, at the ground level, the concepts and methods needed to coordinate work on what can be termed transdisciplinary objects of in-

vestigation—objects that include, as the present issue suggests, narrativity, digital environments, conversational interaction, ethics, and disability. Such transdisciplinary objects, some of which occupy partially overlapping positions in intellectual space, lie at the meeting point of what Jerome Kagan (2009) (updating C. P. Snow 1959/1998) has called the three cultures: the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. Although none of these three "cultures" can exhaustively characterize the objects in question, by the same token it is impossible to engage fully with such field-transcending phenomena without substantial contributions from analysts working in all three realms of study.

The essays in *Storyworlds* 4 suggest how contemporary scholarship on narrative can thrive by getting out in front of transdisciplinarity and helping reorganize the geography of research around large, multidimensional objects of inquiry whose exploration will require the combined efforts of Kagan's three cultures; relevant objects include, besides those featured here, gender, the mind-brain, art, and nonhuman animals, to name only a few. By bringing the resources of narrative scholarship to bear on these and other complex concerns, future contributions to the journal can likewise promote transdisciplinary convergence. How can narrative analysts contribute to the larger effort to understand the nature and scope of intelligent behavior? How might they help explore what sorts of worlds (and worldmaking practices) are especially valued by a given culture, in what contexts, and why? How can narrative theorists participate in the emerging area of critical animal studies (Wolfe 2003), which focuses on more or less entrenched assumptions concerning the nature, experiences, and status of animals, human as well as nonhuman? Such questions open up new horizons for narrative research, precisely by linking the study of stories with larger, transdisciplinary problems that narrative scholars can help articulate—and thus begin to address.

David Herman

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