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# Contents

List of Illustrations vii
List of Tables viii
Introduction 1
RUTH PAGE AND BRONWEN THOMAS

**PART 1: NEW FOUNDATIONS**

1 From Synesthesia to Multimedia: How to Talk about New Media Narrative 19
DANIEL PUNDAY

2 The Interactive Onion: Layers of User Participation in Digital Narrative Texts 35
MARIE-LAURE RYAN

3 Ontological Boundaries and Methodological Leaps: The Importance of Possible Worlds Theory for Hypertext Fiction (and Beyond) 63
ALICE BELL

4 Seeing through the Blue Nowhere: On Narrative Transparency and New Media 83
MICHAEL JOYCE

**PART 2: NEW ARCHITECTURES**

5 Curveship: An Interactive Fiction System for Narrative Variation 103
NICK MONTFORT

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6 Digitized Corpora as Theory-Building Resource: New Methods for Narrative Inquiry 120
ANDREW SALWAY AND DAVID HERMAN

7 From (W)reader to Breather: Cybertextual De-intentionalization and Kate Pullinger's *Breathing Wall* 138
ASTRID ENSSLIN

8 Songlines in the Streets: Story Mapping with Itinerant Hypernarrative 153
BRIAN GREENSPAN

9 Narrative Supplements: DVD and the Idea of the "Text" 170
PAUL COBLEY AND NICK HAEFFNER

**PART 3: NEW PRACTICES**

10 All Together Now: Hypertext, Collective Narratives, and Online Collective Knowledge Communities 187
SCOTT RETTBERG

11 "Update Soon!" Harry Potter Fanfiction and Narrative as a Participatory Process 205
BRONWEN THOMAS

12 Blogging on the Body: Gender and Narrative 220
RUTH PAGE

13 Using the Force: *LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game*, Intertextuality, Narrative, and Play 239
JAMES NEWMAN AND IAIN SIMONS

14 Digital Narratives, Cultural Inclusion, and Educational Possibility: Going New Places with Old Stories in Elementary School 254
HEATHER LOTHERINGTON

Glossary 277
Contributors 281

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# Introduction

RUTH PAGE AND BRONWEN THOMAS

In recent years developments in digital technology have played a significant role in the transformation of narrative theory and practice. Stories that exploit the capacity of digital media (that is, those that necessitate the computer for their production and display) have provided vital new territory against which the tools of narrative analysis could be tested and refined. As such, technological innovations from the 1980s onward have been pivotal in providing an alternative to the conventions of print media narrative, allowing those working in narrative theory to scrutinize the nature of narrative production and reception from a fresh perspective. By the 1990s a wealth of criticism was available that made radical claims for a narrative revolution in the light of hypertext, gaming, MUDs, and MOOs (Douglas 1992; Aarseth 1997; Landow 1997; Murray 1997; Hayles 2001). This criticism engaged with a range of narrative concepts, including questions about plot, event structures, and temporality, as well as questions about how stories are produced and experienced, debated in relation to matters such as interactivity, immersion, and agency.

At the start of the twenty-first century, much has changed both in the kinds of narratives that are now available in digital media and in the approaches taken to analyze them. The hypertexts of the 1980s published on CD-ROM by Eastgate have acquired almost canonical status, and have since been supplemented by "born digital" hypertext narratives, that is, digital fictions that were created to use Internet applications to link to sites beyond themselves. Meanwhile, the development of multimedia software such as Adobe's Flash in the mid-1990s enabled creators to integrate an increasingly sophisticated multimodal range of resources into digital texts. While visual and verbal elements have always been present in digital fiction—for example, in the use of icons, illustration, and layout—in early hyperfiction the textual content remained central. Typically, narra-



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tive was carried primarily in the verbal elements of the text, and navigation was enabled through hyperlinked words (illustrative examples are found in Deena Larsen's *Disappearing Rain* [2001] and Geoff Ryman's *253* [1997]). What Kate Hayles (2003) describes as the second wave of digital fiction enriches the multimodal capacity of electronic literature. No longer are words so prominent, but graphics and animation are just as likely to communicate story content or be used as part of the interactive interface. Contemporary examples include the quasi-cinematic qualities like Pullinger and Joseph's ongoing work *Inanimate Alice*, or the visual richness of Fisher's *These Waves of Girls* (2001).

Increased access to and usage of the Internet has also influenced the creation and reception of narratives in new media.[1] Where once the ability to create online text would have entailed specialist knowledge of programming techniques, the advent of what are popularly known as Web 2.0 technologies in the late 1990s has enabled users with relatively low technical skills to upload and manipulate text with unprecedented ease. The ability to harness the textual resources and networking capacities of the World Wide Web has been exploited by a proliferation of storytelling communities. Such communities may explicitly foreground the act of storytelling, as does the Center for Digital Storytelling, or archives like Bubbe's Back Porch. Other communities have emerged within the wider context of social networking sites, creating new and hybrid stories across modes and genres. The photo-sharing application Flickr has been used to push forward visual storytelling as its users are invited to "Tell a story in five frames" ("Visual Story Telling" ongoing) or document their life story in pictures in the "365 Project." YouTube, the video-sharing website, is fertile territory not just for audiovisual microclips but for fan-videos and mashing movie trailers—examples that not only demonstrate the creative endeavors of web users but contentious debates over intellectual property and copyright. Alongside this, sites like MySpace have provided platforms for individuals to narrate their life experiences on blogs, journals, and discussion boards. Perhaps the most dominant social network site to emerge in recent years is Facebook, which in 2010 boasted 500 million users worldwide. Facebook is a multifaceted environment for collaborative storytelling ventures and for microblogging as its users narrate episodes of their life histories in status updates, wall posts, and comments.



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The development of new narrative forms continues to expand as fast as technological innovation, and faster than can be documented by scholars and reviewers. We acknowledge that the range of texts interrogated by the authors in this volume will soon (if it has not already) appear not so very "new" at all. Instead, they might best be regarded as a selective snapshot of narrative practices—practices already significantly different from the hypertext fictions that were the focus of the first wave of digital narratology. Here we argue for a distinctive move forward into a fresh phase of digital narratology—one that revisits the relationship between narrative theory and digital technology but that explicitly grounds that relationship in a range of contextually oriented perspectives.

The intersections between theory and practice have always been central to the development of digital narratology. Many of the foundational writers in this field (such as Michael Joyce, Jane Yellowlees Douglas, and Shelley Jackson) continue to produce both creative and critical outputs that feed into each other synergistically. It might then come as no surprise to find that the continued innovation in narrative practice has gone hand in hand with profound challenges to the ways in which such texts can be theorized. Retrospectively, the radical claims of early 1990s theorists have been fiercely contested, with later commentators questioning the extent to which the digital forms are distinctive, emancipatory, influential, or narrative at all (Miall 1999; Aarseth 2004; Ryan 2004). However, rather than abandoning the project of digital narratology, recent work that extends narrative theory in the light of digital media has become finely nuanced. Through close readings of particular texts and detailed attention to the contextualized practices, digital narratology now seeks to identify what really is distinctive or innovative about "new" storytelling modes.

## Narratology and Digital Media

This volume brings together diverse narrative practices and equally diverse ways of studying them, in a manner that both reflects and contributes to the polyvalent, expansive nature of contemporary narratology. While the evolution of narrative studies in recent years should not be presented as a simple story of progress toward a single, unified goal, it provides a critical context that illuminates key developments in research on digital narratives in particular.



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*Classical Narratology*

The structuralist agenda for the formal study of narratology was laid out by francophone scholars such as Barthes (1977), Genette (1980), and Greimas (1966) as a transtextual project unconstrained by the particularities of media or culture. Conceptualizing the enterprise in such breadth facilitated later work on texts far beyond the literary canon, including those that would appear in digital media. However, the focus on investigating the underlying semiotic system of narrative resulted in models that tended toward abstraction rather than a full account of localized texts and contexts in which the processes of storytelling take place. By the late 1980s, the limitations of structuralist narratology had become well rehearsed (Brooke-Rose 1990), especially its problematic claims for universality. Nonetheless, the importance of the theoretical models emerging from classical narratology cannot be underestimated. Many of the concepts proved to be robust when put to work in the actual study of narrative practices, and these concepts continue to be fruitful for research on narratives in digital media, whether in conjunction with the study of narrative temporality (see Montfort, chapter 5) or in the rethinking of the nature of narrative grammar (as in Salway and Herman, chapter 6).

*Situated Narratives*

Shortly after the advent of structuralism, complementary narrative scholarship began to emerge in neighboring fields of inquiry: sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics. Focusing on conversational stories rather than literary texts, work on narratives of personal experience (Labov 1972) drew attention to stories as a form of social interaction, grounded in particular contexts and performing significant interpersonal and identity work for groups of speakers. Labov and Waletzky's (1967) pathbreaking study initiated a surge of research (see Bamberg 1997 for an overview) that continues to the present. Yet for the most part, sustained study of face-to-face narratives has remained in a parallel but separate domain from the literary theoretical study of storytelling (for exceptions, see particularly the work of Herman [2002], Fludernik [1996], and Toolan [2001]). Much online discourse is hybrid in nature, blending the written word with near-instantaneous communication, giving rise to what Ong (1982) described as secondary orality. In particular, the narratives that



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emerge in Web 2.0 environments where personal expression is inextricably interwoven with dialogue (for example, through the use of conversational metacommentary) require paradigms that account for both their interpersonal and expressive qualities. These emergent digital stories thus open further possibility for dialogue between researchers working in literary and linguistic narrative traditions.

Ideas deriving from the study of how narrative discourse is used in everyday interactions promise to throw light on stories told in online contexts. Specifically, earlier work identified narrative fragments in now familiar forms of computer mediated communication, such as e-mail exchanges (Georgakopoulou 2006) and discussion forums (McLellan 1997), illustrating how the fragmented, process-oriented, and communal nature of these forms extended our understanding of what narrative could be. However, as the online repertoire of communicative forums continues to widen to include blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, the central role of communities and the stories they tell comes further to the fore. For example, Page's analysis of personal blogs (chapter 12) shows how narratives of illness are reworked in gender-aligned ways to support those undergoing similar experiences. Storytellers might also form albeit temporary communities around particular collaborative storytelling ventures. Rettberg discusses several particular examples in chapter 10, including the project "Invisible Seattle" and the more recent "Million Penguins," a wikinovel experiment supported by Penguin publishing in 2007.

Likewise, this volume has contributions from practitioners who have experience of working within or alongside key projects that explore the implications of new digital narratives for specific localized, "real world" communities. Such work demonstrates the benefits of examining situated narrative practices, in contrast with constructing abstract models of the structuralist variety. For example, Brian Greenspan's chapter 8 outlines the development of the "Storytrek" prototype for digitizing aboriginal songlines. For her part, Heather Lotherington, in chapter 14, evaluates the effectiveness of the Multiliteracies project in addressing issues of cultural inclusion in Canadian elementary schools. In both chapters, the authors bring to light the cultural politics that lie behind the creation of new media narratives. Greenspan carefully argues that uses of virtual spaces are no more neutral than the appropriation of social or geographical spaces, and he points to the challenges of using geospatial information to configure itinerant hypertexts derived from Aboriginal songlines.



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Lotherington's chapter showcases another, somewhat different instance of using technology for the benefit of minority groups. In her case, elementary-age children are enabled to retell traditional fairy tales using a range of digital technologies in a way that engages them successfully with storytelling practices beyond print literacy alone.

*Postclassical Expansion*

The diversity of contemporary narratology is characterized by expansion beyond classical narratology's literary perspectives and data set. For digital narratology, this is manifest in several ways. From the outset, integrating narrative and new media approaches has been by definition interdisciplinary, drawing on concepts from fields such as artificial intelligence and computer science and examining texts and practices that broaden the medial, generic, and modal range of data that might be considered storylike. This volume aims to expand the possibilities of innovative work in this area. Both Punday (chapter 1) and Joyce (chapter 4) reflect on the nature and influence of media and medial expansions. From another perspective, Salway and Herman's essay (chapter 6) explores how a freely available text-analysis software package can be used for the study of narrative corpora, demonstrating how technological advances might yield new tools for narrative analysis. On the other hand, contributions like Ensslin's study (chapter 7) of experimental hyperfiction and Lotherington's essay (chapter 14) on the images and movies created by schoolchildren suggest how the same digital technologies can be used to support multimodal narrative productions.

Furthermore, the augmentation of classical, structuralist narratology by critical perspectives from other fields has led to a heightened sensitivity to the political ramifications of narration, and indeed of narrative theory itself. While the practical outworkings of such politicization might remain a matter for discussion (Currie 1998), the apparent neutrality of narrative systems has in general been replaced by a critical narratology that draws attention to the ethics of storytelling and argues for the inherent value of narrative practices among formerly neglected minority groups. Within the study of digital narratives, we might now chart the emergence of a similar political sensitivity. Many of the studies included in this volume examine the formal qualities of digital narratives with



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critical perspectives that attempt to address inequalities relating to gender or cultural identity.

In this way, the essays demonstrate how contemporary narratology has moved beyond formalism to explore issues of gatekeeping and access (as in who gets to tell what kinds of stories, and in what contexts), and to interrogate the increasing corporatization of cross-media franchises such as Lucasfilm's *Star Wars* (discussed by Newman and Simons in chapter 13) or the Harry Potter phenomenon (discussed by Thomas in chapter 11). The influence of corporate practices on storytelling across media is also discussed in Cobley and Haeffner's work surveying changes in DVD formatting (chapter 9).

The critical and contextual breadth of digital narratology owes much to the tenets of new media theory, which concerns itself less with the stylistic or textual characteristics of new narrative forms than with the environments and social and cultural formations that produce and consume them, as well as the cultural uses to which narrative practices may be put. Wary of both technological determinism and crude progressivism, new media theory locates discussions of specific practices and communities within broader debates surrounding globalization and cultural imperialism. Attitudes toward new media practices may range from enthusiasm for the democratizing potential of interactive or participatory media to skepticism and suspicion of the economies of use that may marginalize and even exclude many social groupings. For some theorists, the transgressive potential of new media subcultures is something to be celebrated, and necessitates a rethinking of basic models and paradigms in the direction of hybridization rather than binary opposites—for example, mainstream versus marginal, or orthodox versus heterodox. Meanwhile, key concepts such as those of convergence (Jenkins 2006) and remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) demonstrate the need to move beyond fixed categories and boundaries in attempting to respond to the ever-shifting and evolving practices and affordances facilitated by new technologies.

Media theory and new media theory more especially view narratology's traditional focus on the text with some distrust. In turn, media theorists have been accused by narratologists of "text blindness" (Hausken 2004) both in their reluctance to engage in textual analysis and in their often cavalier disregard for the specific terminology and textual conditions of the kinds of narrative that they discuss. In both fields the challenge is to



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find a language to replace the concept of the text as a static object with the idea of texts as dynamic processes. By the same token, both media theorists and narrative theorists have recognized the need to view readers and audiences not as passive recipients of semantic contents but rather as participants in the coproduction of the text's meanings. Yet minor differences in terminological nuance continue to perpetuate a sense of divide, even where the object being scrutinized is similar. For example media theorists prefer to talk of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2007) while in narratology the term *transmedial* is usually preferred, both to highlight a concern with the materiality of different media, and to acknowledge the influence of semiotic theory (Ryan 2006). Likewise, in new media theory, cross-media texts or cross-media platforms both hold currency to describe what has been labeled in digital narratology as distributed narrative (Walker 2004).

More significantly, perhaps, attempts have been made to challenge the extent to which new media practices must be conceived of in narrative terms at all. Indeed, Lev Manovich (n.d.) charges that the word *narrative* is overused in relation to new media "to cover up the fact that we have not yet developed a language to describe these strange new objects." Instead, Manovich proposes the database or the algorithm as a way to better understand this emerging cultural sphere. Similarly, Espen Aarseth (1997; 2004) has contested the reliance on narrative models in relation to computer games, proposing instead the term *ludology* to foreground the importance of play and interplay between participants.

While this volume is generally enthusiastic about the affordances and possibilities opened up by new digital technologies and practices, it is important to recognize that voices have been raised against the cybertopianism found in much of the existing scholarship. In particular, literary critics such as Sven Birkerts (1994) have spoken out against what they see as an attack on print cultures and on established practices of critical reading and analysis. Meanwhile, David Miall has used empirical research on readers to demonstrate how hypertext fiction disrupts the experience of immersion and absorption that he argues is intrinsic to the literary experience, and to challenge the assumption that "literature can be made to dance to the multimedia tune" (Miall and Dobson 2001). Where new digital narratives explicitly intersect with questions of literariness (e.g., hypertext fiction, fanfiction), it becomes necessary to evaluate and explore



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the cultural place of such practices and the extent to which they can continue to offer the kind of affective engagement Miall and others see as so intrinsic to literature.

## Central Concepts in Digital Narratology

As suggested in the previous section, the ongoing project of reworking and extending classical, structuralist models of narrative has been facilitated by the study of storytelling in digital media. A cluster of key concepts has emerged from this work—a cluster also explored by the contributors to this volume.

### *Narrative Progression: A Sense of an Ending*

Early studies of digital fiction recognized the profound challenge that the associative qualities of hypertexts posed for narrative coherence (Landow 1997). The critics pointed to a central distinction between conventions of reading print narrative and reading stories told using the affordances of hypertext structures. Namely, print narratives are typically read from a series of consecutive pages whose sequence is determined by the author, while the lexias of digital fiction are navigated via a series of hyperlinked words or icons, the sequence of which is selected in part by the reader. Of course, there is no strict binary opposition between reading print and reading hypertext. Binding a sequence of print pages within a book cover does not preclude a reader indulging in a spoiler and reading the last pages of the story first. Conversely, digital fiction writers might be careful to arrange lexias in such a way that the segments of the story follow a strict chronological order. Nor should the reading conventions of particular media be conflated with narrative structure. Print narratives might contain extraordinarily complex temporal patterning and sophisticated configurations of possible worlds. Digital fiction need not. Nonetheless, the associative patterns typically exploited by the first-wave authors of digital fiction were theorized as generating a new spectrum of plot typologies (Ryan 2006, and chapter 2 of this volume), challenging theories of the nature of narrativity itself.

In particular, the multiple pathways characteristic of early digital fiction provided critics with fresh material against which to consider the forms and functions of narrative closure. Deferred endings or the possibility of multiple endings are not confined to narrative genres in digital media and



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can be found in offline stories from serial genres, such as the soap opera, through to postmodern fiction (for a discussion of hypertext's antecedents, see Landow 1997). Nor is the question of narrative closure related only to hypertextual fiction. In the essays that follow in this volume, deferred endings come in many guises and serve many functions. In Cobley and Haeffner's essay (chapter 9), DVD add-ons are seen as facilitating an immediate affective response to the text, while in Thomas's exploration of fanfiction (chapter 11), the capacity to endlessly update reworked stories is a source of readerly pleasure. In the case of the personal blogs considered by Page (chapter 12), the open-endedness comes in the episodic blog posts and their comments. Although deferred endings are in fact a concern of many of these essays, the authors are careful not to ascribe to such endings uniform character. As digital narratology becomes more contextually aware, it is clear then that we cannot conceptualize narrative in isomorphic terms where a single textual feature (here open-endedness) might signal a definitive relationship between form and function, a point that has been made in narratology more generally (Sternberg 1982).

### *Narrative, Fiction, and Identity*

Hitherto, the impact of digital textuality on narrative theory has been concentrated for the most part on structural concerns. But narratives are not just sequences of events: those events are told by and about particular individuals. As the study of digital texts increasingly includes narrative practices, it is all the more pressing to reconsider how the relationship between narrative and self-representation might be reworked in the context of online environments.

It has always been acknowledged that storytelling, whether claimed to be fictional or not, is a selective and partial method of representation. As Bamberg reminds us, narrative analysis is not a transparent measure of identity but forms a "heuristic" for considering how the self comes into being (2004, 211). Assumptions about online representation further complicate debates about the relation between narrative, self-representation, and fictionality. On the one hand, the Internet is often perceived as an environment that enables apparently free identity play (for example, through adopting false and/or gender neutral pseudonyms, avatars, and other forms of role play). On the other hand, conventions of authenticity still prevail, such that notorious cases like Kaycee Nicole (a fictional per-



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son with leukemia created by Debbie Swenson in 2001) are rightly understood as hoaxes, and where enacting infidelity in a virtual world can be grounds for divorce in the offline domain.

The boundaries between these two positions are blurred by the uses of "fictional" representation across online genres. For example, autobiographical hypertexts such as Shelley Jackson's *My Body* (1997) weave together life story and artistic endeavor, making it difficult to isolate particular pieces of information about an individual that are deemed to be true in the real world. In contrast, danah m. boyd (2008) reports on American teenagers' use of "false" personal information on social networking sites as a deliberate strategy to be recognized as fictional by friends but to be taken as authentic and so ward off attention from unwanted lurkers.

The oscillation between the contradictory expectations of authenticity gives rise to an ambiguity that challenges the boundaries of fictionality (see Bell's chapter 3 for further discussion) and means that we cannot treat any discussion of narrative and identity work (for example, as seen in Page's essay, chapter 12) in essentialist terms. Rather, it forces us to consider the various ways in which narrators and readers treat stories told in digital media as bridges between their online and offline experiences.

Examining the relationship between identity in online and offline contexts is a salutary reminder that readers and writers are not abstract figures but actual individuals and that producing or processing narratives in digital media is an embodied experience. Far from viewing the online world in cybertopian terms as free from physical constraint, the essays in this volume include discussion of the human body as an important resource for readers and writers. In the chapter on blogging (chapter 12), the human body is a site for signification as bloggers construct narratives about their ongoing experience of illness. Meanwhile, Ensslin's chapter 7 examines the ways in which the human body interacts with a digital narrative. She takes as her subject an unusual subgenre of digital fiction: physio-cybertext, where the reader's navigation through the story is driven by his or her breathing pattern. Her analysis of Pullinger, Schemat, and babel's *The Breathing Wall* allows her to explore distinctions between corporeal and cognitive responses and so rework the concept of intentionality. In both essays, the relationship between the embodied experience of the reader/writer and the narrative is dynamic and mediated, allowing us to revisit readerly practices from a fresh perspective.



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*Narrative Interaction*

The communicative interplay between a storyteller, an audience, and the story itself has long been a matter of interest to narratologists, and it is of heightened significance in relation to digital texts. Interactivity is repeatedly cited as the feature of digital media that most clearly distinguishes it from older, nondigital genres (Ryan 2004, 2006; Aarseth 1997; Walker 2003). How we define interactivity and its various forms remains a matter of debate, as Ryan explores in her chapter 2. She points out that neither traditional concepts of agency nor the idea of ergodism fully encapsulate what is entailed by the dialogical, reciprocal nature of interactivity.

In many of the essays that follow, concepts of interactivity (in its broadest sense) are reworked and extended in the light of recent technological and narrative developments. Both Montfort (chapter 5) and Bell (chapter 3) examine the possible worlds with which a user might interact via different digital genres. Bell's chapter explores early examples of hypertext fiction published by *StorySpace*, interpreting readerly navigational choices as moments where ontological shifts between different levels of possible worlds are foregrounded. In contrast, Montfort takes Interactive Fiction as his starting point. His chapter examines a technological architecture that forges new ground by enabling writers of Interactive Fiction to control event and expression levels of the narrative separately. Drawing on Genette's classical model, he demonstrates how users can enact variations in time and order, and points to future possibilities for automatic text generation.

Interactivity need not be considered a purely dyadic phenomenon between a single user and a single text. Rather, the networking capabilities of digital technology mean that textual interactivity can be coupled with the interaction between users. In turning the focus to actual communities of storytellers, this work marks a departure from textually oriented studies of interaction. Previously, typologies of interaction have tended to treat the figure of the reader in abstract, theoretical terms (for exceptions, see studies by Douglas 1992, 2000). In contrast, several of the writers in this volume ground their analyses in the empirical study of particular communities and collaborative projects. For example, Rettberg (chapter 10) surveys the history and methods of collaborative authorship, setting out different forms of conscious, contributory, and participatory



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user engagement demonstrated in various online projects. In so doing, he calls into question standard narratological concepts such as "narrator."

Collaborative interaction also bears on issues of plot development. Thus, Thomas (chapter 11) and Page (chapter 12) explore two different communities that evolve through writing about the same stories. In both fanfiction (Thomas) and blog writing (Page), interaction takes place in a mediated form through the collaborative construction of a metacommentary. The interaction here is clearly a dialogue between users rather than the navigation or authorship of a particular text. Analysts of digital storytelling need to develop ways of understanding the ongoing, process-centered nature of storytelling within such online interactions and also the genres thereby created and contested.

## New Narratives: The Dialectic of Theory and Practice

This set of essays sets out to exemplify the breadth and flexibility of current approaches to the study of digital narrativity, and to demonstrate the usefulness of these approaches for understanding emerging forms and practices. The volume is structured such that it moves from suggesting new theoretical paradigms and conceptual frameworks for the analysis of digital narratives, toward exploring new architectures, uses, and platforms for narrative, and culminates in specific and detailed analyses of specific narrative practices and processes. However, there are many crosscurrents and commonalities between the chapters from each of these sections, and as suggested earlier, one of the defining concerns of the volume is to challenge the often arbitrary divisions made between theory and practice, or between theoretical frameworks and the modes of storytelling that complement rather than contradict one another. Each of the essays may be read individually as a contribution to the field in its own right, but when read in the context of the other contributions, each essay helps generate a rich dialogue about the interplay between the theories, practices and narratives that continue to evolve in digital media. It is our hope that the essays will advance our knowledge of these forms, stimulate new developments in narrative theory, and possibly even provide a springboard for new forms of narrative practice—both while the narratives discussed here are "new" and in the years to come when they will be augmented by storytelling possibilities not yet imagined.[2]

*Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas* 13

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## Notes

1. Discussion of narratives dependent on new technologies often uses the terms *electronic*, *digital*, and *new media* interchangeably. However, the term *new media* is usually employed to encompass the other two, and to suggest the ways in which computers have helped transform "old media," and in particular to move from analogue to digital technologies.

2. The authors wish to thank David Herman for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay. All errors, of course, remain our own.

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