

# Digital Narratives — Theories, Criticism(s), Achievements: Introduction

**RUI TORRES**

University Fernando Pessoa; ICNOVA, Portugal  
rtorres@ufp.edu.pt

**JILL WALKER RETTBERG**

University of Bergen, Norway; Center for Digital Narrative  
jill.walker.rettberg@uib.no

**SCOTT RETTBERG**

University of Bergen, Norway; Center for Digital Narrative  
scott.rettberg@uib.no

**JOSEPH TABBI**

University of Bergen, Norway; Center for Digital Narrative  
joseph.tabbi@uib.no

Digital narratives include stories in computer games, electronic literature, virtual and augmented reality, chat bots, web and mobile apps as well as stories that circulate in social media or are AI-generated. Algorithms play a central role in our everyday experiences of these stories, increasingly contributing to the organization, generation, and structuring of narratives.

The publication of this thematic issue coincides with the launch of the Center for Digital Narrative (CDN), a Norwegian Center of Research Excellence. The Center has an express focus on “algorithmic narrativity”: simply stated, this constitutes the human capacity for storytelling with the effects of the computer’s ability to generate and manipulate symbols. The ways that we tell stories have changed significantly in recent years as the mediation of computers in their networked contexts have added another agent in the storytelling process. Digital narratives are no longer simply negotiated

between a storyteller and an audience: systems influence, afford, and constrain those stories through a layer of algorithmic processing. CDN will investigate manifestations of this algorithmic narrativity in venues ranging from electronic literature to computational narrative systems, from computers to social networks.

This issue of RCL coheres with the concerns of the CDN in a variety of ways. It specifically addresses how an awareness of digital technologies, platforms and algorithms can help us understand newly emerging digital narratives in our current globalized network society. Our goal was to motivate the analysis of how digital narratives remediate our cultural contexts and re-integrate literary modes and methodologies, by confirming or opposing the specific affordances of platforms, and how these exchanges create opportunities for media literacy, education and social justice. And to achieve this, we invited scholars and artists to submit papers that address the interaction between human storytelling and computational methods, providing a triangular structure that included approaches based on *Theories* (with speculations and reflections on cross-disciplinary and foreign languages, and a digital repurposing of narrative genres), *Criticism(s)* (the interpretation and discussion of narratives that preceded print and again focus on themes, disputes, cultural interactions and hypertextual displacements, more than solitary immersion in a linear narrative), and *Achievements* (the presentation of processes and models embedded in digital narratives).

Research on digital narratives not only requires interdisciplinary investigation, it also requires cross-cultural inclusivity and community-building, as Hannah Ackermans argues in her contribution to the present gathering. For Ackermans, the field of electronic literature is “built on a transmedial narration of the field itself” by a community. This “self-narration” of the field takes place “across media, from academic articles, conferences, exhibits, databases, Zoom meetings, and some artistic work and personal communications.” *Inclusivity* across languages and nationalities is for Ackermans central to “the institutionalization of electronic literature, in academia and beyond.” And community, too, is presented by Ackermans as a formative element in electronic literature. Indeed, the creation and the collective act of building communities emerges in her article as a vital concept in understanding digital narratives in the globalized network society in which they emerge.

The emphasis on communal inclusivity in Ackermans coincides with what Diogo Marques and Ana Gago regard as a “(Re)creating” of our “Heritage through Digital Literature.” Theirs is an artistic and cyberliterary research project that aims to use artistic creation as a platform, not for making something ‘new’ or placing algorithms and amassed data on display for its own sake. Rather, their re-creations, re-interpretations, and remediations aim at rebuilding an emerging cultural heritage that can be found outside museums.

Ana Monteiro and Miguel Carvalhais similarly regard narratives as “essential to our perception of the world.” In their contribution they trace some of the history of

interactive digital narratives with a particular discussion of the reader's agency and arguing for an enactive approach. As we see in each of the contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Communications and Language*, there's more to the "glocal" project of digital narrative than novelty. Now that we're decades into the algorithmic creation (and structured digital archiving) of literary arts, authors of born digital literature channel their computational interests and "embodied sensorimotor making" (Monteiro and Carvalhais) into an emergent narrative formation from elements that represent, and to some extent generate communities in formation.

David Thomas Henry Wright and Chris Arnold take a practice-based approach to digital narrative. Their paper for this issue first discusses the maximalist novel through Stefano Ercolino's theory and novels by Zadie Smith and Jonathan Franzen, then presents their practice-led research, where they created a digital novel, *The Perfect Democracy*, that responds to the maximalist print novels. With maximalist bravado, they aimed "to capture the entirety of contemporary (Australian) culture." Wright and Arnold argue that creating a digital novel in response to theory and print literature serves to "extend, subtend, and resolve the literary research".

In their "Computational Models for Understanding Narrative," Montfort and Pérez y Pérez similarly argue that theory should be operationalized, as they write, although they have developed generative models rather than an individual work to do this. In their paper, Montfort and Pérez y Pérez demonstrate how computationally modeling theories of narration not only produce systems that can generate narratives, the process of operationalizing the theories in software code actually helps to refine the theories by identifying gaps and lack of specificity. Through a discussion of two computational narrative generators, Pérez y Pérez's MEXICA and Montfort's Curveship, the authors develop specific insights gained regarding the theories they model: the Engagement-Reflection Cognitive Account of Creative Writing and Genette's narratology.

Those modifications, which make us more aware of our own (often unconscious) cognition and unreflective flow of ideas, take on literary and cultural value through reflective processes that connect our work in progress with our own (and our readers') moment by moment awareness of ourselves in relation to others. A digital work can sometimes produce loosely structured, multi-vocal gatherings, but our reflective (and reflexive) cognition is capable of turning these loose and free flowing engagements into sustained and interactive narratives. It all depends on how both authors and readers, engaged and reflective cognizers adopt and adapt to digital media, how the works circulate among authors, co-authors, and readers, and how we creatively and critically play with networked and multimodal forms of writing.

While Pérez y Pérez and Montfort develop computational models to improve our understanding of narrative theory, Davin Heckman develops theory to improve our understanding of large language models and artificial intelligence. He boldly argues that "the human has become a text, and the machinic apparatus its reader and writer".

Heckman draws upon theories from Foucault, Barthes, and Simondon to understand humans' *prosopopeia* or personification of AI, and uses these insights to analyze a selection of works of electronic literature that use machine learning in various ways, including D. Fox Harrell's *Chimeria* (2014), John Cayley's *The Listeners*, Allison Parrish's *Reconstructions*, Ian Hatcher's *Prosthesis*, the netprov *Grand Exhibition of Prompts*, Talan Memmott's *Introducing Lary* (2023) and more. Heckman describes these works as "electronic/generative literature that reflects the current situation and perhaps make it more habitable and/or readable in some sense." At the end of the article, Heckman has a brief look back at some of the generic and narratological anticipations. By thus drawing upon the history of those who have come before and anticipating those who will come in the future, Heckman hints at how literature has always imagined its own future through acts of remembering. Reinventing, and not just citing prior works.

Finally, we publish Tegan Pyke's review of The New Media Writing Prize 2022, the 13th edition of an initiative that involves digital narratives. Pyke provides a detailed description and analysis of the artworks of the three winners: *Anonymous Animal*, by Everest Pipkin; *Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real*, by Media-Lab Glagol, the Belarusian Touristic Union, and the EVZ Foundation; and *Penrose Station*, a virtual reality narrative by Kathryn Yu.

As computational environments emerge from our distributed and ever changing media ecology, our cultural contexts shift and transform as well. The impacts of algorithmic narrativity on renewed and emerging narrative forms demand contextualized and situated studies about how they are produced, circulated and extracted, as well as self-assessment and criticism to explain how interactions of human authors with non-human agents are programmed, structured and delivered.

The editors would like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this issue, as well as the reviewers who have contributed with their evaluations and assessments of the received submissions.

We are also thankful to Talan Memmott for the authorization to use an image from *Introducing Lary*, an AI-driven project concerned with cancer survival, on the cover of this issue. The project is an exemplar of how emerging platforms can be harnessed for new forms of digital narrative. More information about the project can be found at: <https://talanmemmott.info/?tag=introducing-lary-project>

**RUI TORRES**

Rui Torres is Professor of Communication Sciences at University Fernando Pessoa. He has books, articles and other publications about semiotics, media, and electronic and experimental literature. He is the director of the *Cibertextualidades* book collection (FFP Press) and is a co-editor of the Electronic Literature Series (Bloomsbury Publishing). He is a Member of the Board of Directors of ELO — Electronic Literature Organization, and the Coordinator of the Digital Archive of Portuguese Experimental Poetry.

**ORCID**

[0000-0002-3337-0863](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3337-0863)

**Institutional address**

Universidade Fernando Pessoa  
Praça 9 de Abril, 349  
4249-004 Porto  
Portugal

**JILL WALKER RETTBERG**

Jill Walker Rettberg is Professor of Digital Culture at the University of Bergen (UiB) in Norway, Co-Director of the Center for Digital Narrative, also at UiB, and Principal Investigator of the ERC project “MACHINE VISION.” Jill’s book *Machine Vision: How Algorithms are Changing the Way We See the World* is forthcoming on Polity Press in September 2023. Her previous book, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*, was published as an open access monograph by Palgrave in October 2014, and can be freely downloaded. Her book *Blogging* was published in a 2nd edition by Polity Press in 2014, and she has also co-edited an anthology of critical writing on *World of Warcraft* (MIT Press 2008).

**ORCID**

[0000-0003-2472-3812](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2472-3812)

**Institutional address**

University of Bergen  
Department of Linguistic, Literary  
and Aesthetic Studies  
Postboks 7805  
NO-5020 Bergen  
Norway

**DOI** <https://doi.org/10.34619/dmmc-vpmx>

**SCOTT RETTBERG**

Scott Rettberg is the Director of the Center for Digital Narrative, a Norwegian Center for Research Excellence. He is professor of digital culture in the department of linguistic, literary, and aesthetic studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. Rettberg is leader of the Bergen Electronic Literature Research Group and director of the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base. Rettberg’s book *Electronic Literature (Polity, 2018)* is a foundational study of the history and genres of electronic literature and was the winner of the N. Katherine Hayles Award for Criticism of Electronic Literature.

**ORCID**

[0000-0002-7401-5075](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7401-5075)

**Institutional address**

University of Bergen  
Department of Linguistic, Literary  
and Aesthetic Studies  
Postboks 7805, NO-5020 Bergen  
Norway

**JOSEPH TABBI**

Joseph Tabbi is the author of *Cognitive Fictions* (Minnesota 2002) and *Postmodern Sublime* (Cornell 1995), books that examine the effects of new technologies on contemporary American fiction. He edits the electronic book review. His edited *Handbook of Electronic Literature* (Bloomsbury 2018) received the ELO’s N. Katherine Hayles Award for critical writing. He is professor of American Literature at the University of Bergen. Tabbi served as President of the Electronic Literature Organization, 2007-2010.

**ORCID**

[0000-0002-0067-4545](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0067-4545)

**Institutional address**

University of Bergen  
Department of Linguistic, Literary  
and Aesthetic Studies  
Postboks 7805, NO-5020 Bergen  
Norway