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The Effect of Digitisation on the Novel

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Abstract: When text goes digital it changes forever. It's no longer fixed unalterably on the page. Readers can play with it, change it, comment on it, even rewrite it if they so wish. Interactive digital technology dissolves the barrier between reader and author; it challenges ideas of finality of version and of authorship. What do these changes mean for the novel? Can it function in the digital arena? By democratizing and making public the publishing and writing processes, such technologies and platforms challenge the norms surrounding the author reader dynamic and the role of the individual in reading and writing established by print.

Keywords: e-Book, Orality, Online, Novel, Author, Reader, Transmedia Web 2.0, Digital Technology, Multivocal, Interactive

Introduction

THE INTRODUCTION OF interactive digital technologies to publishing ‘promises (or threatens) to produce effects on our culture, particularly on our literature... just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg’s movable type,’ (Landow 1997, p. 21).

We may see these technologies change the novel in ways as fundamental as those by which the novel itself changed oral storytelling. In both cases a change in medium resulted (or in the case of digitisation, which is an ongoing process, is resulting) in a major change in the form of the content: storytelling.

The print novel is not simply oral storytelling in print form. It does not concern itself with the ‘reinforced communality... of earlier oral and literary forms,’ (Skains 2010, p. 96) rather it is ‘consumed in privacy and solitude’ and is concerned with ‘the interior lives of individuals’. It brought into being a new kind of individuated storytelling and story consumption, separating the reader from the writer in a way previously unseen: dividing them into ‘two distinct elements in the publishing process, that do not normally interact’ (ibid).

Nor is the novel, under the influence of digitization, simply the print novel on screen; it ‘may evolve into a wholly new form that we cannot fully envision today... as authors and publishers add enhancements and interactivity... and explore new methods of collaboration and as readers engage with these new forms,’ (Warren 2009, p. 84). The inherently interactive nature of digital media introduces narrative possibilities akin to those found in the communal storytelling of oral cultures, blending these with the individuated form and concerns of the novel to once again, perhaps, create an altogether new form of storytelling.

Marshall McLuhan discussed this process in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (1964). His most famous aphorism, ‘The medium is the message,’ (1964, p. 23) speaks directly to this idea of the influence of medium on the form of content; how the different requirements and attributes of a medium directly affect what is communicated by it.

McLuhan envisioned that electronic media, such as the television, telephone and radio, would end the reign of print as the dominant medium for communication and storytelling. He saw the silent individuated world of print reading replaced by a communal (tribal) consuming of stories via screens and loud speakers, reminiscent of the manner in which stories were created and consumed in oral cultures.

McLuhan's vision was realised, to some extent. Electronic media did claim a large sector of the public media sphere through the latter half of the Twentieth Century. But rather than replace print, these media offered an alternative communication and storytelling experience. An experience which, although different in terms of the type of audience engagement, still adhered to the lines demarcated between audience and storyteller (reader and writer) introduced by the print novel.

The introduction of interactive digital technologies to publishing in the early 2000s birthed a medium which allowed audiences not only 'to engage *with* what they read heard and saw,' in digital publications, but to actually 'engage *in* the process itself,' (Bruns 2011, p. 133) both individually and en masse, as was formerly the case in oral storytelling. Thanks to social media channels and news media comment facilities readers/viewers/users were encouraged to contribute to stories and to engage actively in their development. In the digital world the novel too is no longer necessarily a 'one way street' (Skains 2010, p. 96). It too is opening itself up to the idea of reader involvement in the construction, rather than just the interpretation, of narrative.

This paper will discuss the effect of interactive digital technologies, on text, asking specifically whether the novel will be so changed by its influence that it does evolve into something new, in the same way that print changed oral storytelling into something new, namely the novel.

From Oral Storytelling to the Novel

Any discussion of the novel's future in the digital world needs to take into account it's past.

According to Walter Ong: 'The print world gave birth to the novel,' (Ong 1982, p. 145). But what was, or is the print world?

The print world is not simply the world of print, that is, the world of standardised, reproducible, paper-based texts produced on printing presses. It is the marriage of that world to the notion of the individual. 'Print is the technology of individualism' (McLuhan, Marshall 1962, p. 158) and 'the novel is very much concerned with the interior lives of individuals,' (MacKay 2011, p. 26).

Print allowed for the widespread dissemination of ideas of Renaissance Humanism, protestant individualism, the Romantic idea of the artist as singular genius and of Liberalism. These ideas influenced a (Western) world which, prior to their introduction, largely saw itself as a homogenous mass before God. Notions of individual worth, responsibility, point of view and perspective created an individuated populace ready to use print to tell and to sell stories written about and by individuals. Detailed stories with intense personal narratives, focusing on the lives of fictional, yet seemingly real, characters: novels.

The novel then, with apologies to Ong, is more explicitly the love child of print and the individual, both of which had a massively transformative effect on what was, prior to their introduction, an oral and communal storytelling culture.

In birthing the novel, print made wholesale changes to storytelling in terms of creation and dissemination and the positions and roles of storyteller and audience. It gave rise to the notion of the individual author, the silent reader, the publishing industry and the economic consequences of the commodification of stories and information through print.

According to Ong, in the oral storytelling cultures that preceded literacy in the west, memory was the only information storage device.¹ Therefore, in order for stories to survive they had to be easy to remember and recall. They were formulaic in construction, populated by puns, mnemonics, stock characters and plots, and other memory aids. They featured repetition and redundancy-insurance against a rowdy audience missing key points. And they were conservative. It takes a long time to memorise a story accurately. If a change is made and then decided against it is impossible to go back to the earlier version once it has been forgotten.

The composition process in oral storytelling is therefore very structured. The creative element in that medium lies in the telling, in interacting with an audience, reacting to their responses, and in manipulating formulaic elements such that a story adapts to an audience. No audience is ever the same as any other; neither is any telling of an oral tale even if the storyteller is the same.

Writing, and in particular print, freed the mind from having to house all story-related information and gave that job to the page, thereby doing away with the need for memory aids. With both writing and print 'the mind is forced into a slowed-down pattern,' (Ong 1982, p. 40) providing the author with room to experiment with narrative and detailed, imaginative and varied constructions of character and plot. In print, as in writing, the creative act of story creation is performed solely by the author (usually in private) who delivers a standardised final text version of a story, one which is exactly the same for every reader every time it is encountered. Although the author and reader both have roles to play in the realisation of the story, they are separated by both distance and time. They must work separately. The author must imagine the reader and vice versa. In oral storytelling the teller and audience create the story together at the same time and in the same place.

Prior to print, reading and storytelling was done out loud, usually by one to many. Print introduced silent reading. Books became cheaper, as the means to produce them became industrialised, meaning that each individual reader could afford to have their own copy of a work. There was no need for communal reading. Plus, it took great concentration for readers to engage with these intricate narratives and characters and to build in their minds the kind of fictional world that Ong terms 'a complete unit, self-contained in its silent inner logic' (Ong 1982, p. 147). It is best to do such involved work silently and alone.

In separating the reader and the author, print effectively changed storytelling from an interactive two-way, to a one-way broadcast, process in which one party gives a completed story text to another. Print also removed the simultaneous and communal delivery of multi-sensory content through the use of tone of voice, gesture, smell, sound, touch, and props, all of which are characteristic of oral storytelling. It replaced these with a final version consisting solely of words on a page delivered in a rigidly defined linear order which could be understood only through the sense of vision. From this novel text readers create the necessary props, audio, tastes and sights thereby filling in the gaps in meaning inherent in the author's text,

¹ See (Ong 1982, pp. 37–57) for a discussion in exquisite detail of the differences between oral and literate cultures. It is only possible to include the most basic summary of these ideas in this paper.

allowing them to build their own bridges ‘relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed,’ (Iser 1989, p. 9), thereby creating Ong’s complete world.

This special relationship between author, text and reader is crucial to the notion of the novel and is a direct consequence of the effect of (the medium of) print on (the message) storytelling. Each individual reader builds a unique fictional world in their mind based on this standardised text; the novel needs the highly structured protocols of the print format to deliver this particular message form.

In conclusion, perhaps the crucial difference between stories of an oral tradition and those told in novel form is one of control. Not that one is controlled and the other is not, rather it is where and in what way control is exercised by each medium that shapes the message.

‘Control of position is everything in print,’ (Ong 1982, p. 119). Without rigorous control over the presentation of a story, print cannot function and as a consequence nor can the novel. Perversely, it is this insistence on order and standardisation, on final versions and on authority that allows authors the freedom to create intricate and dense stories, knowing that they will be produced exactly as intended and that they can be read and reread by many, without that message being altered.

The oral storyteller, conversely, has the freedom to present, or tell, a tale in whatever way works at the time, but must do so using only the highly structured and controlled formulaic story elements he/she has memorised. And although each audience member will take away something different from this experience, there is a definite sense that the story is created communally and therefore the notion of individual story realisation, Ong’s complete world, is severely limited.

The Effect of Interactive Digital Technology on the Novel

If the print world gave birth to a new form of storytelling in the novel, will the digital world give birth to something different again? The rapid developments made in the forms of e-readers, of e-books and of enhanced e-books would suggest so.

McLuhan was correct, to an extent, in believing that electronic media would return society to the communal or tribal: people did (and do) gather around screens and loud speakers to consume multisensory stories in groups. What McLuhan could not know was that in the digital world, as opposed to the electronic world of the late Twentieth Century, readers/users would each have their own screens. So, although content is created and consumed communally (in the virtual world) it is done so individually (in the real world).

The digital world is tribal in that, through social media, it is possible to belong to many different groups and to interact and consume communally with them. This is, however, usually done in a virtual space accessed by individuals who bring with them unique identities, online profiles, biographies and images. This insistence on the maintenance of the individual in light of the communal and vice versa is characteristic of interactive digital media and one that very much influences how content is created and consumed in that arena.

The digital world takes this blending of the communal and individual even further-allowing for each user to become many-to become in effect multivocal (A term the online resource *Urban Dictionary*, suggests has been used by psychologists to suggest a ‘multiple individual that embraces many selves and in a technological perspective can possess multiple bodies.’ (*Urban Dictionary* 2012)). In this instance the term is used to refer to the facility for Internet users to adopt and create many individual virtual identities.

Cover suggests that 'identity formation occurs in 'accord' with culturally given discourses, structures and practices' (Cover 2012, p. 178) and that 'a sense of self is forged across an array of identity categories... which include axes of discrimination such as gender, ethnicity ability and age,' (ibid, p. 180). But digitization is changing these cultural givens such that virtual identities might be created outside of or in spite of the influence of any perceived category. Digital axes of discrimination, being virtual, are easy to manipulate but difficult to interrogate.

As a result of this each digital media user is able to create and maintain as many virtual identities as they care to in terms of both person and role. This 'notion of the performed multiple persona at once challenges and critiques traditional notions of identity formation, expression and existence,' (Hofer 2006, p. 321).

This notion of multivoidality, or performed multiple persona, becomes important for this discussion given that it describes how digital users are able to assume the identity and roles of both author and reader, or several versions of each, varying in virtual gender, location, age and ethnicity.

Whatever forms of storytelling message the digital world gives birth to will be heavily influenced by this marriage between the individuated world of print and the world of the digital multivoid. It will exhibit elements of both: we have become tribal creatures, as McLuhan predicted, brought into a communal arena by electronic and digital media, but our multivoid identities are, simultaneously, members of many tribes (Facebook groups, Twitter lists, Google + circles). The lines, drawn between us by the print world, which identify us as discrete individuals are blurring.

Socrates (as written by Plato) said of the written text that it was dead. It could not respond to criticism, or change its mind and that written works have 'the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence,' (Plato 1993, p. 88). The very immutability that gives writing (and in turn print) its imagined authority was seen by him to be a weakness. He recognised that the control that written (and in turn printed) texts exercised over the presentation of ideas and stories changed them in a fundamental way, locking them into permanent, inflexible attitudes.

Digital texts, while similarly concerned with control of position on a page, are not hamstrung by the economics of print production that make altering a print text prohibitively expensive, rather they are endlessly and cheaply updateable. It is possible for such works (or at least the authors of) to respond to criticism and question through the text. It is possible, therefore, for a digital text to change its mind, to learn, and to do so swiftly and repeatedly. In this sense digital texts function more like oral than print works.

The idea of final versions, essential for print to function, is also present in the world of digital text, but it is not a necessary quality of it. This offers unique challenges to the novel in that medium. The idea of a final version of a story is tied into the concept of uniqueness and individuality, both on the part of the creator of a work (the author) and the work itself. This raises two issues for the novel. One, if the digital author has the ability to continually rewrite the text of a novel, forcing the reader to continually revise their understanding of it, then Ong's complete world is made harder to achieve. Secondly, as mentioned previously, anybody with the requisite software can play the role of author with any digital text, raising two more issues. Firstly, if anyone can change a work, then potentially any version of it, even the author's, is only one version of a story and, secondly, the idea of the author as sole

originator of a work is therefore challenged. The multividual reader is also potentially an author and vice versa.

The novel *Pride Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen & Grahame-Smith 2009) is a prime example of these developments in action. The digitisation of Jane Austen's original text allowed Grahame-Smith to access it easily and to rewrite it. Both authors are listed on the cover of the new version. Which is the definitive version? Is it the original text, or does that simply provide source material from which the newer version was developed?

The digital world seriously challenges the position of the author in the storytelling process. In this world it is possible to plainly see the borrowings made by authors, to understand, as Foucault wrote, that they are facilitators rather than the 'genial creators' (Foucault 1971, p. 159) of works. It is also possible to see that a text, a novel, exists as a thing that is open to change over time, not something which exists as a bounded finite entity. This is akin to an oral understanding of storytelling in which:

'The lines between reader and writer blurred, as each storyteller added his/her own elements and inflections, while leaving others out. No one owned a copyright on these tales,' (Skains 2010, p. 104).

Foucault suggested that the notion of authorship was linked to the idea of a unique individual being the author of a discrete, finished 'work'. He saw these notions eroded by a changing society that recognised and facilitated the idea that works do not exist as discrete identities, and that the author was more a 'necessary or constraining figure' (Foucault 1971, p. 159) of the fictive rather than the sole creator of it.

Issues of authorship, version control, individuality and multivoidality while important to any understandings of the role of the author and the idea of a novel being complete do not, however, affect the novel as a storytelling text presented in a linear format. Removing notions of finality of version and definition in terms of authorship simply bring into the world of the novel the idea that there can be more than one version of a story and more than one author of it; a very oral-culture understanding of story. It is still possible, though, under these conditions, to write, publish and read novels (as the print version of the form is understood).

However, once convergent technologies (interactivity, video, audio, and the performative) are introduced, then the idea of the novel as a linear text is potentially seriously disturbed. These additions fill in the 'gaps' in the text, in effect pre-realising much content for the reader, thereby making it impossible for Ong's complete world to exist. Such digital works make content accessible to several senses at once, requiring simultaneous attention to multiple foci. They drag the eye away from the print word and onto a moving image, they engage the ear and, if the reader is required to interact with the content, they demand user input via a keyboard, or a touch screen.

The vast majority of e-books on the market at the time of writing, however, feature very little convergent technology. Often this is limited to the ability to link to a dictionary, and to make notes on and to clip the text, functions that print readers can already execute. Enhanced e-books, those that do feature interactive digital technology and which do, to various extents, allow for readers to interact with and to engage in the story process enjoy only a very small market share.

There are those, such as Evan Schnittman, managing director of sales and marketing at Bloomsbury, who believe that the inclusion of such technologies and interactive opportunities

are doomed to fail in the case of the novel and that, 'enhanced will have an incredibly big future in education, but the idea of innovation in the narrative reading process is just a non-starter,' (Jones 2011). Virginia Murdoch of the e-book publishing company, Booki.sh, expressed a similar sentiment at The Reader, a one day symposium held by if: book Australia in May 2011.

Schnittman is correct in so far as it is impossible for enhanced e-books to maintain a coherent novel-form narrative, in the same way that it is impossible for a photograph to communicate the same information as a painting does, even if they are of the same subject. By expecting these works to behave in the same way as novels we are condemning them to failure. We must accept that the marriage of the multivocal author/reader with interactive digital technologies that allows for readers to become involved in the creation of narrative texts will change the form of the novel, will evolve into a new kind of storytelling.

So-called enhanced eBooks, or apps, such as *Alice for iPad* (Carroll et al. 2010), *Dracula: the Stoker Family Version* (Stoker, Pilditch & Marmulla 2010) and *Frankenstein for iPad and iPhone* (Morris & Inkle Ltd 2012) offer a vision of how the impact of these technologies is changing novel-based storytelling in the digital arena. The fact that these works are based on existing novels rather than being new works created specifically for digital reading speaks to the idea that this is an evolving field in terms of form and content. Nevertheless they do provide useful examples of how the impact of such technologies is affecting storytelling.

Alice for the iPad (2010) makes use of convergent media, but only through the inclusion of reproductions of classic Alice in Wonderland imagery. Some of these are rendered as interactive graphics, which the user can send tumbling around the screen by swiping or tilting the iPad. The user interacts with the text in a manner similar to the way in which one might read a pop-up picture book, therefore any disruption of the narrative process caused by these interactive graphics is no greater than one might expect to encounter in such a work.

Dracula: the Stoker Family Version (2010) offers a similar mix of classic imagery and manipulable graphics. In this case sound is incorporated too and the reader is at times offered pulsing words, or presented with envelopes and other devices which allow them to uncover hidden textual, audio and graphic content.

Both of these works, although they allow for limited reader interaction still adhere to the textual linearity of the novel form. Users can play with the content as presented but they cannot engage in or manipulate the narrative stream.

Frankenstein for iPad and iPhone (2012) takes the enhanced e-book one step further offering the user the chance to make decisions about the direction of the narrative. The user plays the part of an interlocutor involved in a conversation with Frankenstein. The user selects from lists of questions and responses, each choice sending the story in a different direction, somewhat akin to the 'choose your own adventure' story genre, popular in the late Twentieth Century. Unlike those stories though, the choices the user makes only affect the narrative in the short term; no matter what decisions are made, the story more or less follows the traditional Frankenstein plot. It is, for instance, impossible to stop Frankenstein creating the monster or to stop the monster from killing Elizabeth. Reiser (1997) identifies this lack of reader ability to affect the outcome of such stories as one of the major reasons why interactive fictions often fail. The reader is only ever to make decisions concerning what Barthes terms 'cardinal functions' or 'hinges' (1975, p. 247) which allow them to make decisions about the immediate direction of the narrative without ever allowing them to make decisions concerning 'Indices' (1975, p. 246) which influence character behavior and psychology.

While these creations might perform well as digital works, they significantly alter the form of the novel texts that they are based on such that they no longer function as novels. They are better described as experimental reinterpretations of novels in a new medium. Using the words and phrases ‘e-book’, ‘enhanced e-book’ and in the case of *Frankenstein for iPad and iPhone*, ‘a new kind of interactive novel’ (<http://www.inklestudios.com/frankenstein> 2012) to describe them, suggests that they should function and behave as novels do—that they should deliver the same message as a novel does. They do not do this. A new nomenclature is required to describe them more accurately and to liberate them from the shadow of the novel. It may well be that interactivity has no place in the narrative process as we *currently* understand it, but as digital forms which offer new narrative processes are developed, it is likely that it will.

Pottermore (Rowling 2011), the online realisation of J K Rowling’s Harry Potter novels, offers another vision of how narrative may come to exist in the digital world. This website creates a world based on Rowling’s novels. It uses convergent technologies in its storytelling and is interactive. It includes notions of multivocality by allowing readers/users to participate in the story through assumed character identities that become embroiled in the ritual and lore of the Potter world. It also allows users to interact communally with others through a comment facility and to create their own content by uploading drawings and pictures. It is still limited in terms of the user actually being able to manipulate the existing narrative of the novels, but it does make use of what Pullman calls ‘phase space’ (Pullman 1998, p. 47) the potential storytelling that surrounds the actual telling of a story. Mackey discusses phase space calling it the home of:

‘Things that might have happened in the plot but did not, aspects of characters or incidents that are known to the author or that can be imagined by readers but that are not laid down in the novel itself’ (Mackey 1999, p. 19)

By allowing readers to play in the phase space surrounding the Harry Potter books, Rowling allows them to contribute to and share those might-have-been moments, and to add new material to the greater universe of those books. While still not a truly interactive construction of narrative this does demonstrate how we might begin to build storytelling structures by which readers and authors might make use of these interactive technologies in the creation of narrative texts in the digital arena.

Conclusion

Storytelling under the effect of interactive digital technologies is still in the early stages of its evolution. Our ability to create stories using this technology is currently outstripping our knowledge of how to shape them. We have no widely accepted digital form such as the novel or the oral story in which to house digital tales. However, by continuing to shoehorn digital stories into understandings of the novel we resemble the printers of incunabula works who, similarly lacking in new forms in which to cast their works, shaped them as closely as possible to manuscript form. Perhaps so many enhanced e-books are unsatisfactory simply because of this: being caught between two worlds they are unable to adequately function in either. Perhaps it is time to abandon the idea of the novel, in relation to the digital, and instead play in the phase space surrounding storytelling. What narrative possibilities might we dis-

cover in that arena if we free ourselves from trying to adapt the novel with all its attendant strictures and formalities to the screen and focus instead on how to take storytelling itself into the future?

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