

Digital Humanities in the Nordic Countries / 7–9 March 2018

Abstract of a presentation
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The Future of Narrative Theory in the Digital Age?

As it has often been noted, digital humanities are to be understood in plural. It seems, however, that quite as often they are understood as the practice of introducing digital methods to humanities, or a way to analyse “the digital” within the humanist framework. This presentation takes a slightly different approach, as its aim is to challenge some of the underlying biases within a humanist field, narrative theory, through the properties of today’s computational environment.

My presentation starts from the fact that the ancient technology of storytelling has now become enmeshed in a software-driven environment. This development (and “digital turn”, in general) has so far mostly escaped the attention of narratologists, although it has had profound effects on the affordances and environments of storytelling in media. For example, computational media not only has the potential to simulate (or “transmediate”) all artistic media, but also differs fundamentally from verbal language in its structure and strategies.

For its part, narrative theory originates from literary criticism and bases its concepts and understanding of narrative in media mostly on printed works. While few trends with a more broadly defined base are emerging (e.g. the project of “transmedial narratology”), the analysis of verbal narrative structures and strategies from the perspective of literary theory remains the primary concern of the field (see Kuhn & Thon 2017). Furthermore, the focus of current research is quite medium-specific, while various phenomena studied by narratology (e.g. narrativity, worldbuilding) are agreed to be medium-independent.

In my presentation, I briefly illustrate the underlying biases of current narrative theory through the properties of computational media. As software-driven, conditional, and process-based, storytelling in computational environments is not so much about disseminating a single story, but rather about multiplication of narrative, centring upon the underlying patterns on which varied instantiations can be based. Furthermore, they challenge the emphasis on fixed media content and author-controlled model of transmission. (See e.g. Murray 1997 and 2011; Bogost 2007, Hayles 2012, Manovich 2013, Jenkins et al. 2013.)

I argue that if the biases are not addressed, narrative theory cannot genuinely deal with the “new norm” represented by computational media. The norm is “new” compared to the prototypical narrative developed in the study of literary fiction. For this reason, narratologist Brian McHale has recently predicted that narrative theory “might become divergent and various, multiple *narratologies* instead of one – a separate narratology for each medium and intermedium” (2016, original emphasis).

In my view, such a future fragmentation of the field would only diminish the potential of narrative theory. Instead, the various theories could converge or hybridize in a similar way that contemporary media has done – especially in the study of today’s transmedia which is hybridizing both in the sense of

content being spread across media and in the sense of media being incorporated by computer and thus, acquiring the properties of computational environments.

Narrative theory can, thus, truly contribute to the study of storytelling practices and strategies in contemporary computational media, but various biases underlying its toolkit must be genuinely addressed first. The need for this is urgent not only because “narratives are everywhere”, but also because the old traditional online/offline distinction has begun to disappear.

References

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