Chapter Seven

Millennium Stories: Interactive Narratives and the New Realism

> In contrast to our vast knowledge of how science and logical reasoning proceeds, we know precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories." —Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible* Worlds (1986).

". . .[S]urrender . . . and the intimacy to be had in allowing a beloved author's voice into the sanctums of our minds, are what the common reader craves," writes Laura Miller in "www.claptrap.com."[1] Critic Sven Birkerts, too, sounds a similar note of surrender in *The Gutenberg Elegies*: "This 'domination by the author' has been, at least until now, the point of writing and reading. The author masters the resources of language to create a vision tht will engage and in some way overpower the reader; the reader goes to work to be subjected to the creative will of another."[2] Like many readers with a slender experience of the medium, both critics assume that, if interactive narratives don't physically spell the Death of the Author Roland Barthes described metaphorically in his famous essay of that name, interactivity will somehow diminish the author's role, make it nearly irrelevant—a fear, as we saw in the previous chapter, that is as lacking in substance as it is naive.

Strikingly, both Miller and Birkerts assume they speak for the desires and predilections of The Reader, as if *The New York Times* bestseller list were still stacked with the titles both mention reverently, novels by Dostoyevsky, Austen, James, and Flaubert. A peculiar note of triumph in her tone, Miller notes that the

only people who seem to be buying hypertext fiction are writers of hypertext fiction, a number that dwindles into insignificance alongside those who fairly recently charged Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* on their Visa cards. While *Cold Mountain* may well have been stacked alongside a million bedside tables during 1998, however, the people reading *Mrs Dalloway* , let alone, say, *Ulysses* or *Gravity's Rainbow* are mostly writers, graduate students, or professors of English. As a student of mine once noted: Yeah, he'd read *Ulysses*—just not personally. If the distance yawning between the bestseller lists and the vestigial remains of the literary canon still dictating the significant works of historical periods on university syllabi hasn't already brought home just how varied readers's tastes and habits are, surely a quick glance through inventories at Barnes & Noble or Amazon.com would forever destroy the myth of The Reader, that singular, educated entity who once queued outside bookstores awaiting the release of the latest from Henry James or Saul Bellow.

As we saw in Chapter 1, readers enjoy the trance-like spell, immersiveness, and ability to screen out the buzzing world around them that are the hallmarks of ludic reading only when they are reading books that are undemanding, immersiveness existing in inverse proportion to the complexity of the characters and prose. Even if we disregard the nostalgia for the now-vanished educated Reader who never existed in significant numbers, a deeper irony still underlies both Birkerts's and Miller's horror at the postmodern hypertext barbarians at the gate: their educated Reader exists on a continuum sandwiched somewhere to the right of your average consumer of Harlequin Romances but far to the left of readers tackling the likes of *Ulysses*. Simpler, highly conventionalized texts more completely absorb any reader's cognitive

capacity for comprehension than difficult ones—with the richness of structure as readers perceived it in fiction inversely proportional to the complexity and originality of the reading matter.[3] Demands made by readers grappling with *Ulysses* require frequent pauses and regressions, breaking the "readerly enslavement" so valued by Miller and Birkerts alike. Conversely, highly conventionalized plots, stereotypic characters and settings make for an ease and more even pace of reading that absorbs readers' cognitive capacity more completely, leading to the absorption and quasi-trance-like pleasures that Victor Nell has described as "ludic."[4] Far into the 19th century, reading fiction was seen as the equivalent to a drug, probably due to readers' abilities to become "lost" while reading light fiction—the equivalent of today's genre or mass market—fiction: "The effect of inordinate addiction to light reading . . . came under the head of 'dissipation,' and to read novels, as to drink wine, in the morning was far into the century a sign of vice."[5]

The very reasons why Austen, Dickens, and Dostoyevsky seem such thoroughly beguiling bastions for humanists everywhere is the ease with which readers can lose themselves within texts with enough of the ingredients common to conventional plots and stories to make for the beguiled, ludic experience that satisfies our core desires for reading, yet contain enough superficial and local complexity to render them interesting enough to close out external distractions while reading—and sufficiently unchallenging to not demand the pauses and rereadings of most avant garde and postmodern fiction. In her study of the contribution of Artificial Intelligence to narratology, Marie-Laure Ryan distinguishes between vertical and horizontal motivations that drive narratives. Motivation is vertical when it justifies the plot through ideas that

transcend the narrative events. In horizontal motivations, some events might be subordinated to others, but justification, ultimately, remains entirely within the plot, nestled securely and tidily inside its temporal sequence—another feature that may also account for the popularity of the highly conventionalized novels of mass-market and genre fiction, as well as of the novels that constitute the mainstream of literary fiction.[6] Horizontal motivation also makes plots more interesting because it invokes our tendency to perceive events in terms of causation, as mentioned in Chapter 3, which may well account for one of the primary reasons why we read for pleasure. If narrative, as Bruner has suggested, is about "the vicissitudes of intention,"[7] it is also, as historian Hayden White argues, about seeing events "display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure . . . that [in life] can only be imaginary."[8] The ways in which interactive narratives map and yet don't map onto this concept speak eloquently to potential for future development in hypertext fiction and digital narratives alike. And to the reasons why we listen, read, or watch fictions in any medium unfold, climax, and resolve for no purpose aside from the unalloyed pleasures they give us.

# # #

Narrative Schemas - The Changeless Story

> [Narratives] seem to satisfy a universal craving for a unified, closed, and imaginary analogue to life in an open-ended and accident-prone world."—Bert O. States, *Dreaming and Storytelling* (19xx).

Not surprisingly, in the early stages of any medium, few genres exist. During the incunabular phase, moreover, genres flourish, wither, and die: between 1450 and 1500, the 20 million incunabular texts produced included ballads and chapbooks, vulgarized versions of chivalric tales—old and familiar forms easily ingested by poor readers who passed them on, hand to hand, until they disintegrated. Of these early forms of print fiction, no current descendants survive, entire genres wiped out by the advent of penny periodicals in the late 18th century.[9]

More recently extinct in our own century: the kinetiscope shorts that represented fodder for nickelodeons, with radio serials that once dominated the air waves hanging on at the top of the Endangered List, represented mostly by Britain's *The Archers* , a nearly sixty year-old relic that predated television. Strikingly, the continuity of what we might call the macroplots of radio serials—questions regarding the life choices, health, crises, and motives of the characters crowding serials like *The Archers* extending over weeks, months, or even years—temporarily vanished during the sixties and early- to-mid-seventies when *The Munsters* and *The Brady Bunch*, *All in the Family* and *Barney Miller* and even dramas like *The Waltons* alike focused mostly on microplots, dilemmas easily described, pursued, and resolved within the program's thirty minute or hourly slot. Where radio producers hoped to keep listeners tuning in each week to discover the outcome of a decision or even the fate of particular characters, television producers mostly hoped viewers would return to programs out of senses of identification with the characters, the particular milieux in which they lived, or even with the look of series like *The Avengers* and *Mission: Impossible!*

With the development of *Hill Street Blues* , however, producers returned to macroplots as valuable devices that ensured viewers returned to watch the show, pursuing resolutions to macro- and microplots alike each week—a formula for designing, writing, and producing a series that has become a staple of network television.

Of course, macro- and microplots have long been staples of stories, dating back even to Homeric epics. In *The Odyssey* Ulysses struggles to return home safely to Penelope—the macroplot— battling against obstacles like the Sirens and Scylla and Charbydis —microplots that may also impact on the macroplot. While microplots involve their own smaller dilemmas, climaxes, and resolutions, their complications generally explicitly or implicitly threatens successful resolution of the macroplot. If Ulysses and his crew cave in to the songs of the Sirens and come ashore, their ship will be wrecked, and they will either be left wrecked and stranded—or possibly even dead—bringing the story of Ulysses's struggle to return home to Penelope to the deadest of dead ends. Likewise, a microplot in*ER* might involve detoxing a drug-addicted newborn, a potentially dangerous process that brings a full-blown investigation down on Doug X's head. Julia Margulies' (character's name) reaction to Doug's quandry—will she back him up or censure him?—both affects the trajectory of the microplot and nudges closer to resolution one of the larger plots in the macroplot extending over the lifetime of the series, involving Doug's philandering and inability to make a steadfast, long-term commitment to her. As much as they might be bewildered at the outward trappings of the stories in *ER*, the audiences who once listened to Homeric rhapsodes would recognize the plot schema represented by the series—because it represents a story schema that is as

ancient as stories themselves: whether spoken, written, recorded, filmed, created with Photoshop and RenderMan, or posted on the World Wide Web.

At one time or another, everyone from linguists like Vladimir Propp and A.J. Greimas to psychologists of reading such as Kintsch and van Dijk have attempted to explain how narratives work. Few theorists, however, have been able to describe *why* narratives work, and, in particular, why, say, the Oedipus plot can resurface in several hundred guises (including its starring role in Freud's case narratives) over thousands of years without its core appeal ever being exhausted. To begin to answer some of these questions, we can examine the ways in which one of the most sophisticated examples of digital narratives represents, surprisingly, a veritable paradigm of classic storytelling, relying on rules authors use for telling stories and processes readers use for comprehension as fleshed out by Robert de Beaugrande and Benjamin Colby—rules that enable us to isolate the features of stories that readers consider well-told or interesting.

At its core, every story is about characters's plans to attain goals—even when the particular goal may be simply returning to the state the character enjoyed at the very outset of the story, prior to tackling the steady stream of opportunities, complications, or calamities that throw the plot into gear. Often, plans and goals may exist in conflict with one another, even when a single character holds them. For example, in the digital narrative *The Last Express*, protagonist Robert Cath wants to avoid attracting attention while aboard the Orient Express because he seems to be hiding out from police himself. Yet, when his friend and compartment-mate Tyler Whitney is murdered just after the train pulls out of the Gare de l'Est, Cath must balance his desire to remain on the train

invisibly—given reasons he has for avoiding the police himself—with his wish to discover the identity of his friend's slayer.

Not surprisingly, the plans and desires of one character frequently contradict or clash head-on with the intrigues and ambitions of others. Cath's desire to discover both Whitney's killer and what his pal might have been up to just before his murder conflicts with Serb passenger Milos Jovanovic's goal of securing the shipment of guns and ammunition from German industrialist August Schmidt, munitions the Serbs need to free Serbia and Croatia from the grip of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. August Schmidt's price for the guns is Prince Kronos's gold-filled suitcase, which Kronos will trade only for the jewelled firebird egg stolen from Tyler Whitney by one of the twenty-nine passengers on board the Orient Express. Of course, each local—or micro—goal potentially conflicts with other micro-goals. Cath must play along with both Schmidt and Kronos, pretending he has something to trade with each of them until he can recover the firebird or steal the gold or both. If he fails to deliver the guns to the Serbs, they will probably kill him; if he delivers the guns to the Serbs, they will probably commit terrorist acts against the Hapsburgs still controlling the Empire—something that some readers know will result in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the tinder that lit the long fuse leading to the outbreak of World War I. The Serbs plans, a famous and attractive violinist's secret spying mission, even seven year-old François Boutarel's fascination with whistles and beetles, all complicate, threaten, and, because *The Last Express* is an interactive narrative, potentially or actually terminate the macroplot and the reader's experience of the story—if only temporarily. Plans, conflicts, goals,

clashes, and rewards are the stuff from which everything from *The Odyssey*to *Twelve Blue* and *The Last Express* are made.

What is unusual about Beaugrande's and Colby's relating storytelling rules to processes is their definitions of interesting and enduring stories. Goals and actions, states and events cannot be so obvious that their outcomes are certain or simply retrace the normal outcomes familiar to us from life. For us to be drawn into narratives, the relationships between characters, actions, results, and reactions must be uncertain.[10] All participants in narratives—the narrator, the narratee or audience, and, the characters involved in the plot's intrigues and actions—spend much of their time predicting, obliging the narrator to "outplan the audience at least part of the time to keep the story from becoming predictable and boring."[11] Mystery stories derive much of their tortuous twists and rogues galleries of suspects from this need, leading the narrative to encourage readers's misdirected suspicions in every direction possible until the stories' climax. Even in other, less intricately plotted genres, however, readers learn in detail about characters's aims and plans, leading them to attempt to anticipate the probable outcome of the conflicts that lie just ahead by relying on their own experiences. The more intricate and difficult the problems, the "greater the energy and the deeper the processing expended on story comprehension."[12] When in *Twelve Blue* Javier and Beth visit the hotel where Ed Stanko possesses the only existing photograph of Javier's grandmother, we know enough about Stanko ro realize that his character is sufficiently bitter, twisted, and stunted to make it unlikely that he will so much as let them see her photograph, let alone surrender the portrait to them. Joyce's narrative, however, turns our predictions back on us, blunted. Instead of a

violent confrontation between Stanko and Javier, we discover Javier and his daughter arriving at the hotel in time to encounter Stanko's tenant, Eleanor, freshly daubed with her now-dead landlord's blood.

The twists in *Twelve Blue* are unexpected and thus heighten our pleasure in the narrative as we witness the author outplotting us, urging us to guess, then revealing how our guesses fall short of reality. But what of the genres that rely on a slender array of story types, or, even, stories—like the Oedipus plot—that have been recycled for millennia? How can we, who know its intrigues and revelations so well, still take pleasure in its unfolding, if so much of our pleasure is bound up in prediction, anticipation, and discovery?

Beaugrande and Colby venture two possible explanations why storytelling need not remove uncertainty absolutely from narratives. First, global and local processing of information— for example, recognizing and remembering the types of goals and actions common to characters in thrillers involving espionage—draws attention away from the particular details of Robert Cath's goals and actions aboard the Orient Express, because they occur on a different cognitive level than our processing information about Cath's status as a 29 year-old American and amateur *agent provocateur* who may or may not be on the lam from a few botched intrigues of his own before he even boards the train in Paris:

> The knowledge of global structures of a narrative might not be on the same level of processing depth. . . Interest is upheld during repetitions of the same narrative because the audience predicts only global

> data, and rediscovers local data each time. . . [E]nduring narratives--and perhaps art objects of all kinds--manifest inherent structural complexities whose processing demands, even after repeated exposure, remain above a certain threshold of cognitive storage abilities, and yet below the threshold where ongoing processing would simply break down.[13]

Another complication—or reason why we never tire of some stories—lies in the significant energy readers expend in anticipating the consequences of actions, evens, and reactions repeatedly throughout a narrative.[14] Further, as so many stories invite readers to anticipate murder, mayhem, love, and death throughout, readers may persist in anticipating disastrous alternatives at the end of each narrative junction or strand—partly, as some critics have claimed, to satisfy an innately human need for intense excitement, leading them to indulge in romance, violence, and death vicariously.[15] Identifying with a character—however fleetingly—and anticipating a Jason or a Freddy lurking just around the corner can

> awaken the same sort of anxiety people undergo when recalling their narrow escapes in real life. In retrospect, people are safe just as narrated protagonists are known to be safe after earlier narrations; but tension still arises from mental

> reconstruction of what might (or even ought to) have happened.[16]

Another reason why outplotting the reader's expectations is instrumental to telling a satisfying story: we turn to narratives to slake our thirst for danger, excitement, adventure, and to reassure ourselves that the world is, after all, an orderly, secure, relatively peaceful, and, above all, mostly predictable world.[17] Narratives resolve these two apparently irreconcilable longings by placing the violence, destruction, and danger within highly conventionalized forms that recover for us intentions, emotions, and many inward states normally inaccessible to us, at the same time they also provide the entire package in stories that let us observe the neat causal sequences, the tidy, well defined beginnings and endings forever denied us in life. Ed Stanko's murder in *Twelve Blue* is the sort of item that occasions a flurry of news stories which dance around the central conundrum of any homicide—the why—without ever gaining insight into the intentions that flickered through the killer's mind when she picked up the knife. In Joyce's web-based fiction, however, we can enter Eleanor's muddled, frenetic thoughts, discovering in their tangles her conviction that Stanko not only fathered her baby but may also be responsible for its death.

# # #

<u>Millennium Story: Hypertext Fiction and the New Realism</u>

> [T]oday's most successful interactive artists ultimately see interactivity as an evolutionary (rather

> than revolutionary) step for storytelling. —Brent Hurtig, "The Plot Thickens," *NewMedia* (1998).

Strikingly, in *Twelve Blue,* as in films like *Nashville* and *Short Cuts,* there is no macroplot, only a myriad of microplots that touch each other physically, concidentally, metaphorically, but never connect causally in a single overarching plot that brings the story into existence and offers the resolution that signifies its completion.[18] Readers, instead, confront resolutions of some of *Twelve Blue's* microplots and are guided visually through a graphic interface that symbolizes and stands in for the narrative's macroplot: a drawing of twelve brightly colored threads, standing in for *Twelve Blue*'s narrative strands, stacked horizontally in a frame divided into eight bars, representing the narratives's temporal axis. As readers move through the text, they see only the bar, the segment of the graphic, that pertains to their temporal place within the hypertext. When the threads arc toward, touch, or veer away from each other, the stories represented by each strand follow suit, although the narrative strand containing the story of a drowned deaf boy and the fate of his corpse, drifts across the other narrative threads, seeping into other plots—most notably, the hallucinations of the dying Ed Stanko—until it surfaces as the colored thread rises at the end of the frame. While many postmodern writers have traded macroplots for a different set of complications and effects—those of the difficulties and dangers of narration, of telling stories, itself—Joyce introduces an entirely different element into the writers' arsenal of plot, character, narrative, cause, and effect. The image from which *Twelve Blue* partly derives its name corresponds to the revolving center of the text—not a segment of text or a

climactic instant, but a graphic, the image of the bright threads swimming against a field of blue. Appearing alongside each screen of text, the threads trailing across each segment of the graphic act as tangible guides to the trajectory of micro- and macroplots alike, symbols of the ingredients of each narrative strand, and the primary mechanism by which readers move from link to link, as they inch along the horizontal axis of the image, clicking on one of the bright threads.[19] Chief among the distinct technical differences between the World Wide Web and other, earlier, media of representation is its ability to link image and text seamlessly, enabling a uniquely close interplay, even a marriage, between image and narrative, between symbol, plot, and narrative, one that offers glimpses of striking possibilities for the future of hypertext fiction.[20]

Further, Joyce's carefully scripted links bring us the voyeur's point of view, supernaturally privileged from time to time as it drifts from consciousness to consciousness, dipping briefly midstream into the thoughts of a mad woman, the experiences of a drowning boy and the fate of his drifting, decaying corpse, the early flirtations between a couple, the final hallucinations of a dying man. We've moved backward again to the overheard snatch of conversation, the nugget of story buried amid the detritus of everyday lives, all the tiny threads of other lives that briefly brush against ours as we race through our days, immersed in our own micro and macrostories. Perhaps this truly is "the New Realism,"[21] —a fiction which, as Joyce has imagined,

> promises to close the gap between the fragmentary experiments of language and narrative which have characterized so-called literary or experimental fiction

> and the distinctly segmented consciousness of a larger audience who, from moment to moment, settle upon meaning for their lives in the intervals between successive accounts of their own or others' lives in several media. . . a narrative which can make sense of life as it is lived outside the regime of nextness. . . hypertextuality somehow represent[ing] the ordinary mindedness . . . of most people's lives.[22]

# # #

A Little World Made Cunningly: Digital Narratives and the New Realism

> To give the player the feeling of being in a populated world, we had to make sure that we knew what every character was doing at all times, just in case the hero of the story wandered into one of them. Even though the conductor had a very small part, we had to script out a two-minute conversation about politics he was having. And when you do that for 40 characters it becomes a huge amount of writing—far more than a traditional script, and it's all in the background, but it gives [the story] a richer texture.—Jordan Mechner, creator of *The Last Express*, (1998).[23]

> Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?
>
> —H.M. Warner, Warner Brothers, (1927).

In the essay in which he introduced and named the New Journalism, Tom Wolfe attributed the power of the modern novel to the four devices he felt gave it immediacy as well as the capacity to both move readers and absorb them: a narrative rendered scene by scene, eliminating the need for an omniscient narrator or bridging narrative; dialogue recorded in full because "realistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device"; the third person point of view used to present each scene to readers; and the minute recording of the gestures, furnishing, dress, behavior, and idiosyncracies that enable readers to understand something of the protangonist's interior life, desires, goals.[24] One of the most admirable accomlishments of the New Journalism has been its relatively recent influence on non-fiction, decidedly non-journalistic works like Julia Blackburn's *Daisy Bates in the Desert*, Lawrence Weschler's*Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, and John Demos's*The Unredeemed Captive*, works which harnessed the power of narrative fiction to bring readers closer to moments that have receded into the distant past, to bring us closer to realities long gone that remain to us mostly unimaginable—territory that the best digital narratives have now also colonized.

New Journalism's second legacy has gone mostly undetected: it is quite possibly the most low-tech successful bid for realism since the Greeks discovered perspective in art. One of the great paradoxes of realism is that you need as much technology as you can muster to summon it up because the old realism that seemed perfectly adequate when representation was limited to words or paintings suddenly seems obsolete when artists begin playing with daguerrotypes, or kinetiscopes, or steadicams, or Photoshop. The next wave of

reality after the ebb of the one presently breaking may involve suits wired for simulated touch, temperature, impact, head-mounted devices for replacing the world before our eyes with one mostly fictitious, a sort of jazzed up version of the feelies Aldous Huxley described in *Brave New World*, sans the knobs and with a lot more circuits. In the peculiar, paradoxical way of things, as both Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan long ago pointed out, technology has a way of making us more fully human. And of making the aesthetic object that promises to deliver us a facsimile of the world seem a little more real with each layer of complexity that you insert between the object and the world it purports to capture and deliver to us.

The problem with cinema that even Scope and Dolby and IMAX can never resolve is that cinematic protagonists are almost invariably doing cretinous things: venturing into dark cellars when the electricity has been cut off, running in six-inch heels and tripping before flesh-eating dinosaurs, poking around in the sock drawers of neighbors they suspect of bumping off their spouses when their neighbor ducks out for the morning paper. Even while we reluctantly enjoy the suspense of wondering if he or she is going to make it to the next reel, we mostly believe they've got whatever happens coming to them. *We* would never have walked into the house, let alone traipsed down the basement stairs or stumbled and fall down helplessly, wailing, before we're mown down. Digital narratives have long promised that we could come up with our own strategies, our own solutions, possibly even some neat footwork while fleeing the horror of the moment. But games like *Obsidian, Myst, Midnight Stranger, a*nd *Douglas Adams' Starship Titanic* mostly have failed to deliver on them, confining users to sword and gun play and battles, solving puzzles, sniffing out obscure clues, killing

trolls, and manipulating the myriad cliches that have marked the medium out mostly as turf for preteen boys and adults with the sensibilities of pre-teen boys. Try this showdown on for size, sonny. Let's see how fast you are with that joystick.

Until *Myst*, digital narratives remained the equivalent of the pulpy end of genre fiction—a very high tech, extremely costly to produce version of the romance novel, a genre that recycles its characters, heroes, heroines, and plots with an assiduousness that would have garnered praise from the Sierra Club if the resources in question were anything other than purely imaginary. As savvy editors and publishers in the romance game doubtless know, the stereotypes are simply window dressing, something to drape over a plot that provides its romance-starved readers with the paper approximation of a quick fix. Likewise, when digital narratives featured scenes or characters, these served as mere conduits to hussle the player along to the next Test, a sort of coming-of-age ritual re-enacted by millions of joystick-wielding teens, who mostly wanted to leap dungeons and precipices, fence, fire pistols, and wage battles against the clock, the threat of death, or the high scores accumulated by the kid down the block. Adult versions of the teenage digital narrative include *Midnight Stranger* where the goal of finding an extraterrestrial object is the pretense for coming on to a succession of women, practicing the old in-out, in-out some dozen times with a constellation of attractive females after they invite you home with them, and battering a hapless drunk for the sheer fun of it. Some day, sonny, this will all be yours.

Myst bestowed respectability on digital narratives because its environment was so globally rendered, complemented by what appeared to be

languid lap dissolves, eerie, isolated sounds, and a complex array of clues and puzzles that took users weeks, sometimes months, to unravel. Yet, if *Myst* was immersive, it was also a far cry from even the narrative richness of your average paperback plucked from the Fantasy section at the local bookstore. It lacked characters more substantial than the mere flickering faces of Atrus and his sons, fragments of their conversation, and the odd, isolated scrap of writing knocking around on the lawn or in the library. Set conveniently on an island, *Myst*'s environment was highly, if artfully, limited, as was the corresponding dearth of things its users could do on the island. And the user himself or herself had no look-glass self, no defined role within the narrative that blurred or rushed into focus depending on who you were interacting with because there was no one, not another being, around. You either completed the tasks, the puzzles to solve and artifacts to recover, successfully, or you stayed stalled ignominiously in the Selenitic Age—or, worse still, traipsing around Myst Island thrashing on shrubs and colonnades uselessly with your cursor and mouse, praying for clues, the answers to puzzles, or the imminent publication of the *Myst* strategy guide.

Even when characters address you in narratives like *Gadget* or *Starship Titanic* , however, your role is entirely extra-narrative. You're entering a world expressly to pick up pieces, sort things out, and generally restore order, and, to accomplish these tasks, you simply have to abide by these rules. The game has never lurked more than a few millimeters beneath the digital narrative's veneer because, without it, the narrative lost most of its raison d'être. Either that, or, without the game challenges and overall framework, producers needed to provide more richly detailed environments, more branching possibilities that spawned more plot possibilities to be realized and rendered, and characters with

appreciable depth and complexity, all of which can seem needlessly expensive when your audience has been made up of fourteen year-old boys mostly hankering to use their joysticks.

The digital narrative kill or be killed scenario has, however, received some recent nudges and prods, finally making its first strides outside the video arcade and into realms more familiar to cinema goers and readers of fiction. First, Shannon Gilligan's Multimedia Murder Mystery series seized on the mystery and breathed fresh life into it by placing readers squarely in the investigative driving seat. A few decades of TV cop shows have given most readers an easy familiarity with police procedurals and, probably, a hankering for a bloodless and stressless flirtation with directing an investigation themselves: scanning the coroner's report, analyzing blood spatter patterns, fingerprints, the usual detritus of death scenes.

Using the conceit that six hours, on average, elapses between the discovery of a crime and the arrest of the alleged perpetrator, digital narratives like *The Virtual Death* and *Who Killed Brett Penance?* place all the accoutrements of homicide investigations in readers's hands, including a sidekick who guides you through the ropes, hints at recommended strategies for interviewing suspects, and occasionally gives you the skinny on some of your less than forthright suspects. Your interaction, however, is limited to the tools of the detective trade: investigating the crime scene, reading the coroner's report, and interviews with suspects, limited to questions in your notebook you can choose to ask each suspect. And your choices always matter, because each interview question, each test, each request, eats away at your allotted six hour maximum with chunks of time commensurate to the size and importance of the data you receive. Since

interviews with suspects merely trigger well acted video clips, moreover, the characters merely respond to the question, or to the generic role you're temporarily filling, the detective on the trail of an arrest warrant. Still, Gilligan's series considerably extends the narrative complexity and pleasures of a single mystery narrative by offering in *The Virtual Death* three different perpetrators to nail and in *Who Killed Taylor French?* and *Who Killed Brett Penance?* three entirely different crime scenes, three perpetrators's modus operendi to analyze, and, of course, three culprits. In the age of obsolescenece, remarkably, Gilligan's narratives considerably extend the shelf-life of your typical mystery, which readers usually consume quickly and which is seldom suitable for re-reading unless you have a terribly short memory, because the resolution of the print mystery's macroplot destroys most of the limited pleasures mysteries—with their sketchy characters and mostly pedestrian prose—an offer.

With the debut of *Titanic: Adventure out of Time* readers at long last enjoy a richly detailed environment to explore and a compelling cast of characters, a world limited by the ideal conceit: a ship in the middle of the ocean with a scant five or six hours before she plunges to the bottom. In *Titanic* you begin the narrative with a modicum of identity—a few postcards, a tacky flat, and a career that, judging from the correspondance littering the drawer, went into permanent eclipse with the sinking of the Titanic. Once you enter the shipboard narrative itself, you assume the mantle of British secret agent, society gent, and something of a genteel rake, if the protestations of Lady Georgia are to be believed. Perhaps more important, however, your actions and reactions to the other bodies populating the ship ease or interfere with your general missions of recovering

the stolen rare original of *The Rubáiyat* and a notebook recording the identities and whereabouts of the Bolsheviks. Brush off tireless society gossip Daisy Cashmore when she asks you to discover a fellow passenger's identity, deal with Willie von Haderlitz in strictly hostile terms, and you might be in for a very long and fruitless night indeed. For once in the medium, character truly *is* action and action, character.

Still, for every scrap of freedom the user or reader enjoys in a digital narrative, programmers and designer sweat hours and thousands of lines of code, and producers, more importantly, sweat the number of digits in their outgoings columns. Which is one reason why *Titanic* restricts its readers's opportunities for interacting with characters by providing them with a multiple choice list for salutations, responses, and challenges alike. Frequently, the reader's choices are unobtrusive: assenting to an opinion, accepting an offer to play cards, declining another drink with Georgia's boozy, snooty husband. More often, unfortunately, they restrict characters to the tics and drives necessary to fulfilling their appointed roles within the micro- or macroplot scenarios in which you encounter them. Ask Officer Morrow point-blank if you can stick your head around the door to the telegraph shack—a newfangled creation in 1912—and he'll send you on your way. Likewise, if you choose the remarks that offer him a drink or volunteer that you believe war unthinkable, he also sends you packing. Like virtually all the characters crowding *Titanic*, what there is of Morrow's character is strictly a function of his responses to your multiple choice rejoinders, an improvement over the people-less universe of *Myst*, but a far cry from characters E.M.Forster might have described as "round."[25] And, as I noted in Chapter 1, if you decline to pick up Russian dolls and telegrams and negatives

lying on darkroom trays, you're forever condemned to trundling around a ship drained of characters, presided over by a clock that remains stubbornly stopped until you concede defeat and go back to assembling a treasure hunt's worth of clues, like a good player should.

Still, the pleasures of immersion in this lavish, belle epoque environment, fabulously opulent, famously unrecoverable, are hefty, heightened by faithful renderings of Titanic's interiors and haunting musical accompaniments that complement each area of the ship with different themes. The recovery of the Gilded Age with its lavish, privileged swank and settings is, after all, a valuable commodity to late twentieth century audiences accustomed equally to a sense of time's profound scarcity and to the bland homogenity of airports, shopping malls, and hotels the world over—it's what catapulted the film *Titanic* to success, what still makes a transatlantic crossing aboard Queen Elizabeth 2 the sort of event travellers describe reverently. It's also, potentially, one of the singular pleasures digital narratives can deliver—an invitation to experience a simulacrum of a world that vanished forever with the onslaught of the Great War. And, not coincidentally, this same Time Machine-like feature figures heavily in the appeal of Jordan Mechner's *The Last Express*, a digital narrative set in 1914 aboard the Orient Express during a three-day journey from Paris' Gare de l'Est to Constantinople.

Readers entering *The Last Express* encounter animated sequences as the Orient Express idles at the platform and a nervous Tyler Whitney scans the station, eyeing the clusters of gendarmes watching the trains, then, as the train chugs away fromt he station, of a motorcycle racing alongside it and Robert Cath's managing to neatly and unotrusively board the Orient Express with a leap

from the back of the bike onto the train. Once he's aboard, however, Robert Cath is more or less yours—or, more accurately, you are more or less him: able to direct his hands, feet, and voice with a freedom that is quite naturally limited by Cath's own tendencies toward quick-wittedness, adventurousness, and occasional sarcasm. Move your cursor and Cath follows. When your cursor passes over a door or object, it turns into a surrogate for Cath's hands. When opportunities for conversations with other passengers and crew arise, your cursor morphs into a cartoon-like conversation balloon.

Your arsenal of actions and movements feels natural, unusually lifelike because Robert Cath is no tabula rasa, a blank space inviting readers to insinutate themselves into the narrative. As you learn from encounters with fellow passengers and some digging in the bag Cath carries with him, he's a man with a past that remains beguilingly murky, suggested through telegrams and newspaper clippings and some overheard conversation. This is also no bland protagonist who dutifully collects objects and whose conversation you never hear. Decide to head toward Prince Kronos's private railway car early in the narrative, and you'll listen to Cath trade barbs with Kahina, the Prince's bodyguard. Direct Cath to approach Anna Wolff on her own in the dining car, and you'll watch how he handles a brush-off. Since your participation in the narrative is also directive, purpose-driven, Cath's actions unfold in purposive sequences: click on Whitney's duffle bag and it opens, but the narrative leaves what you riffle through and pick up mostly to your choice. And the grain of your interactions is fairly fine, allowing you to explore the train, speak with other passengers, pick up newspapers or a conductor's sketchbook, or sleep according to your particular purpose or whim. Of course, you must react adequately to

challenges as they arise, quite naturally, in a narrative that begins with a murder and features a cast of twenty-nine characters with mostly conflicting goals, including two clutches of terrorists, an assortment of spies, a hyperactive and obnoxious seven year-old, and a good half-dozen potential murderers. Fail to hide Whitney's body adequately or to hide from the police yourself, and the narrative halts as if somebody had hauled on the emergency cord aboard the train—an action you can also take, particularly if you've been nosing your way through *The Last Express* and are searching for a quick out to end the evening's entertainment, since hauling on the emergency cord, not surprisingly, also ends the narrative rather efficiently. The screen quickly whites out, then irises in on an extract from the diary kept by Rebecca West surrogate Rebecca Norton, a diary with a progress you can keep tabs on by periodic snoopings in Compartment E, the current entry summarizing the untimely departure of Robert Cath from the Orient Express, seen from the perspectives of her and her companion, Sophie de Bretheuil.

As interfaces inviting interaction go, *Last Express* represents an evolutionary leap beyond even the ostensibly open-ended input for exchanges with bots in *Starship Titanic* and its PET interface that the narrative so strenuously attempts to incorporate within the confines of the story itself, but which remained mostly a tool for navigating through the ship and manipulating objects. Each direction provided by readers in *The Last Express* triggers entire sequences, so that the interactivity meshes neatly with the core story schematic of situation-event-action-reaction identified by Kintsch, Beaugrande and Colby, and other narrative theorists. Click on the body of Tyler Whitney sprawled on the floor of Compartment Number 1, and you'll watch Cath strain to pick him up

and lay him on the banquette. Point to the jacket hanging above it, and Cath seizes it, swaps it for the now blood-stained jacket he wears, and tosses his own bloodied jacket out the window and onto the tracks. When moving, your point of view is fixed squarely within Cath's perspective; when directing his hands or prodding him into conversation, you assume the third person limited perspective on Cath, giving you at once the voyeuristic pleasures of dipping into another's consciousness, the fun of seeing Cath doing what you've commanded him to do, and of seeing yourself as others see you. The perspective reminds us of cinema's interplay between first person and third person perspectives, sans the strictly voyeuristic role we fill as we watch. In *The Last Express* virtually every decision you make not only fleshes out the lost, privileged world represented by the cross-section of society aboard the elegant Orient Express but also determines your course along a narrative that branches repeatedly.[26]

Not surprisingly, many of the branches are tracks to failure. Open the door to the conductor before you've had a chance to dispose of Tyler, and he'll see Whitney's body, stop the train, and have you arrested. Fail to hide when two gendarmes search the train at Epernay, and you'll be arrested. Botch delivery of the suitcase to August Schmidt, and he removes his cache of weapons from the train in Vienna, leading the Serbs to kill you in a rage as they watch their planned revolution carted away by porters. Where digital narratives formerly punished wrong moves with speedy deaths or successions of doors that refuse to open and characters who cannot be approached, *The Last Express* merely shuttles you onto different tracks that invite you to continue eavesdropping, rummaging through briefcases and under pillows in empty compartments, even liberating Anna Wolff's dog, Max, from the baggage car, so he can menance Kahina as she

breaks into Wolff's compartment as Wolff plays the violin for Prince Kronos in his private car at the rear of the train. Just when you believe you made all the logical choices, however, you can discover in Vienna that swapping the jewelled firebird egg for Prince Kronos' suitcase bulging with gold can strand you in Vienna with an unusual ending for a would-be sleuth or hero. The last scene in this particular version of the narrative features Cath sipping cappuccino in a sidewalk café while straddling the fortune stowed in the suitcase between his knees—while Kronos hurries away with the firebird and the train puffs onward to Constantinople—leaving unsolved and unresolved virtually all of the conundrums you've encountered during the narrative.

The game-like aspects of *The Last Express* provide your actions with purpose, with tangible repercussions for the choices you make, the options you exercise. You can, however, focus on the detailed conversations, the tics and idiosyncracies of other passengers, the fragments of Joyce's "ordinarymindedness" that flesh out the narrative and comprise more than half of its content.[27] Entire conversations exist merely for you to eavesdrop on them without their ever relating to the macroplot's intrigues. While Rebecca's and Sophie's chatter over tea in the salon potentially exists as an opportunity for you to sneak into their room and rake through their effects, you can just as easily stay behind and eavesdrop while you scan the lead stories in the daily paper—especially since Rebecca's diary is mostly a colorful take on the other passengers aboard and your snooping around the pair reveals only what sounds distinctly like an ongoing lovers's quarrel. Norton's diary functions somewhat like a one-woman Greek chorus, only her observations are strictly limited to what Norton sees, hears, and values, and this particular chorene is immersed

directly in a microplot of her own as she struggles for the affections of the capricious and mostly vapid Sophie de Bretheuil. Likewise, the book you snatch from beneath conductor Coudert's chair reveals not a passenger list that might help you in your search for the missing firebird but sketches and caricatures of passengers and crew. Linger alongside the Boutarel's table at dinner and you'll hear Madame Boutarel's scathing replies to her husband's ambitions for their obnoxious seven year-old son, François, another exchange that does absolutely nothing to further either microplots or macroplots. As you draw within earshot of each party, their overheard conversations are subtitled, variously, in Russian, French, and German—languages Cath both understands and speaks. Eavesdrop on Kronos or Mahmud and his harem, however, and you'll find yourself precisely in Cath's shoes, so to speak, listening to a stream of Arabic, sans subtitles, since Cath neither speaks nor understands that language.

# # #

Ordinarymindness and Realism Squared

> It is satisfying to switch position . . . to act in a patterned event and then later view the general pattern, like a synchronized dancer . . . But a computer simulation offers a new extension of this pleasure. On the computer we can reenter the story and experience more than one run of the same simulation. We can . . . exhaust all the possible outcomes. We can construct a composite view of the narrative world that does ot resolve into anysingle

> story but instead composes itself into a coherent system of interrelated actions. Because we increasingly see the world and even our own identities as such complex, centerless, open-ended systems, we need a story environment that allows us tomake sense of them by enticing us into exploring a dense narrative world . . . Whereas novels allow us to explore character and drama allows us to explore action, simulation narrative can allow us to explore process. Because the computer is a procedural medium, it does not just describe or observe behavioral patterns, the way a printed text or moving photography does; it embodies them and executes them.[28]

While Janet Murray bemoans digital narratives' shallow branching structures and disproportionate emphasis on visuals over storytelling , [29]some of her concern seems overly purposive, powered solely by the satisfactions of watching actions and reactions simulated onscreen. When digital narratives dedicate resources, scripts, characters, and narrative branches entirely toward depicting actions and consequences, however, the resulting narrative may be lacking in the local andnot necessarily strictly purpose detail that enriches environments and can lead readers to believe much of the narrative remains to be discovered on a second exploration. If, as in *Titanic,* the responses of characters and the rooms I can explore contain details relevant only to the

potential resolution of the macroplot and its corresponding microplots, chances are my second, third, and fourth narrative run-throughs are going to feel considerably more impoverished than the first one—even making me feel as if I were merely playing the treasure hunt to satisfy my longing for the control generally denied to me in my everyday life, yet another reason for the game, battle, and joystick appeal to teenage sensibilities.

Yet if the print fiction and films we return to are generally economical at the level of plot—including the red herrings and false leads that make for enjoyable mysteries and thrillers—good narratives themselves are inherently wasteful, filled with details at every turn, the flotsam of everyday life, the exchanges heard over lunch that sketch out relationships like one binding Tatiana to her grandfather, the confessions made to us aboard trains we mostly forget, snatches of conversation like the anti-Semitic comment August Schmidt makes in his fawning over Anna Wolff that reveal more to us of a character we've already decided is distasteful. Rich narrative is all about detail that accretes, containing Forster's "round" characters who, like Schmidt, might imbibe a few too many glasses of brandy and end up waltzing with Cath in the salon when his intended assignation with Anna Wolff doesn't play out quite as he planned.[30]

If film derives its immersiveness from its ability to depict the minute detail of life as we know it as the backdrop to story, digital narratives can square this realism by capturing minutiae that is mostly irrelevant to macro- and microplots alike. In *The Last Express* the conductors moan over the parsimonious tippers on board. A cook twists the kitchen boy's ear during prep time in the kitchens. François yanks the legs off the beetle Cath gives him when the bug

refuses to follow orders during a game of soldiers. Overly loquacious George Abbott settles down uninvited alongside a brooding Alexi Dolnikov in the salon and witters on for minutes with the occasional nanosecond pause for a rejoinder or intake of breath, not remotely perturbed by Alexi's stony silence. As Beaugrande and Colby pointed out, the richness of local detail in narratives cannot be fully processed and retained, leading us to reread narratives rich in small, "throw-away" details like these for pleasure, the very details that express character the way we might observe it in life, without our being aware of an author necessarily sketching them out for us in words—yet another example of Wolfe's realism squared. One of the measures of a digital narrative should be its waste, in terms of the amount of detail, characters, potential interactions, and even entire story branches that, to paraphrase Auden's declaration about poetry, make absolutely nothing happen. While realism may entail respecting what readers know about perspective and movement from lifetimes of exposure to art, photography, and film, realism isn't necessarily about 35mm or video clips, since the look of realism and the feel of realism can be two distinct entities, and glossy footage cannot offset narratives where all branches lead more or less straight to The End and a singular conclusion. And, since realism usually deepens our immersion in narratives, this latest push toward a New Realism in digital narratives promises to turn the medium into a source of pleasure, of simultaneous exploration and escape, capable of delivering the aesthetic goods as respectably as and, for some, potentially more pleasurably than novels or films.

# # #

> The central engines of our mind are bent always and forever on the job of making stories, in large themes and a thousand subthemes simultaneously.
> —Philip J. Hilts, *Memory's Ghost: the Nature of Memory and the Strange Tale of Mr. M*. (1995).

Hypermedia fiction and digital narratives on disk, CD-ROM, downloaded from the World Wide Web, or, as our battles with bandwidth restrictions ease, even run in realtime off the Web—the technical specifications and look of these will morph and evolve during the years ahead. What will not change are the things that have always engaged us: the strings of cause and effect; generalizations about character and motivation we accrue from our study of outward dress, manner, tics; the dense weave of micro- and macroplots; and, always, underlying all of it, words, words, words. Contrary to the convictions of Sven Birkerts and other Luddite critics, technology and interactivity nudge us no closer to the extinction of *le mot juste* than we were before the invention of telegraph, telephone, television, or computers. Beneath every interactive adventure, mystery, thriller, or romance lie words, the scripts that render characters round, memorable, the scenes and details that we recall long after we've forgotten the way the thing ends. While it's possible to make a terrible film from an excellent script, it's virtually impossible to turn a hackneyed script into a watchable film. This, surely, is not the secondary orality with which Ong concludes *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, a superficial category that ignores the script lurking behind every exchange of words on television and radio. Instead, in the mid-twentieth century we entered a world

increasingly dominated by scripted orality on radio and television, in films and narratives like *The Last Express*. Or, in the case of interactive narratives, scripting squared, because every interactive text requires a script—or sub-script—that anticipates the potential interests and desires of its readers, their possible moves and actions carefully plotted and blocked, choreographed as the foundation for the script, for the scenes, lines, and sequences readers actually encounter.

As oxymorons go, scripted orality is a fitting label for media and genres themselves rich in paradox. Realism that becomes more real the more it is manufactured. For stories that require more writing than print novels. For genres that seem at once to put readers closer to the action in stories, freeing them to explore realistically scenarios and settings long vanished irrecoverable. Genres that also physically reify and make palpable their authors's intentions. The book is dead. Long live the book—whatever its form.

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[1] NYTBR, need month 1998, (43)
[2] Birkerts, (163)
[3] (B.K. Britton, A. Piha, J. Davis, and E. Wehausen, "Reading and cognitive capacity usage: Adjunct question effects." Memory and Cognition 6, 1978: 266-273.).
[4] Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book* page number
[5] (QD Leavis, Fiction and the Reading Public. London: Chatto and Windus, 1932, p. 50).
[6] (Ryan, 150).
[7] Bruner, Actual Minds, need page #.
[8] (White, The Value of Narratvitiy in the Representation of Reality," in Mitchell On Narrative, 1980, p. 23).
[9] . (Altick--pp. 28-29, see ref on Lost in a Book page, p. 31).
[10] Beaugrande and Colby, (45).
[11] Beaugrande and Colby (49).
[12] (49).
[13] (49)
[14] (50).
[15] (J.G. Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture. Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1976, p.?)
[16] Beaugrande and Colby(50).
[17] (Cawelti. p ?)
[18] [FN: note that this is unique to Joyce and not to web-based fiction, as both Trip and 253 feature micronarratives that exist at the level of one or two segments of text that are part of a larger macronarrative: will the narrator ever track down his ex-girlfriend and return her two kids to

her? What will become of the train hurtling toward the Elephant & Castle? Will anyone survive the crash ahead?]

[19] [FN--readers can also navigate by means of a single text link on each screen they view, although, once they choose the link, it vanishes]

[20] [FN cf Greg Ulmer's "A Response to *TwelveBlue* by Michael Joyce," PMC http://jefferson.village.cirginia/edu/pmc/issue.997/ulmer.997.html]

[21] suggested by Vassar graduate Josh Lechner (cf "Ordinary Fiction," Paradoxa, Summer 1999)

[22] .Joyce's ms for Ordinary Fiction [pp. 11-12]

[23] qtd. in FN Hurtig, Plot thickens, p. 43

[24] . [Wolfe quote--Lost in a book, qtd on (46); 54].

[25] E.M.Forster's th ing on round versus flat characters?

[26] footnote from stategy guide and Render man piece about painstaking recreation of Orient Express.

[27] Strategy guide intro

[28] (Murray 181

[29] Murray (212),

[30] [FN: Of course, you can even be economical with surplus: Joyce conveys ordinarymindedness in only 96 segments of text in *Twelve Blue.* Similarly, Rebecca Norton, Sophie de Bretheuil, Mahmud Makhta and the four-woman harem he chaperones do not even play incidental roles in either macroplot or the microplots it entails. The harem and its escort, however, flesh out the narrative with minimal appearances at doors of compartments, flitting shadowlike in the compartment carriageway as François plays, giggling and gossiping quietly behind closed doors.]