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CAN TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING LEARN FROM HYPERTEXT FICTION? INTRODUCING THREE EXAMPLES OF 4TH GENERATION DIGITAL FICTION

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This paper introduces three examples of social media literature, an emerging 4th generation of digital fiction and argues that works that are mostly considered as transmedia storytelling would gain from being viewed from the perspective of hypertext fiction theory. 'The Big Plot'¹ (2009), 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival'² (2011) and 'Grace, Wit & Charm'³(2011) are three examples of digital fiction unfolding on social media networks using microcontent; small chunks of content like blog posts, Youtube videos and Flickr images to assemble their storyworlds. What can we learn about these works if we look at them through the lens of digital fiction focusing on issues of reading it?

Introduction

What happened to hypertext fiction? Whoever is asking this question is not alone. When we hear the term hypertext fiction it takes us back to pre-web works like Michael Joyce's 'Afternoon, a story' (1987) or Judy Malloy's 'Uncle Roger' (1986). In the post-web era hypertext fiction was created by 'net.art' artists, examples of this are Mark Amerika's 'HTC1.0' (1995) or Olia Lialina's 'My boyfriend came back from the war' (1996). Scholars have discussed hypertext theory mostly based on early pioneering works, therefore when one encounters hypertext fiction today it feels like a genre from the past. In the book 'Analyzing Digital Fiction' the authors introduced the idea of four generations of digital fiction [1]. Hypertext fiction recognized as the first generation, followed by hypermedia and cybertext fiction and now with the emergence of Web 2.0 they refer to "social media literature" as the 4th generation. Visual, audible and ludic elements are increasingly added into our hypertextual reading experiences, and according to Landow's definition of hypertext "which links one passage of verbal discourse to images, maps, diagrams and sounds as easily to another verbal passage" [2], the concepts of hypertext and hypermedia merge. With this background it is arguable that fiction unfolding on social media networks can be seen as hypertext fiction of Web 2.0. Nevertheless we do not call it hypertext fiction, it is rather defined as transmedia storytelling. Why then insist on looking at works as 'The Big Plot', 'Grace, Wit & Charm', 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' and others alike in a canon of hypertext fiction? Because hypertext theory has been extensively discussed both by "first" and "second wave"

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theorists [1] and can therefore bring an additional perspective to analyze transmedia works. This does not mean that frameworks presented in transmedia storytelling would not offer valuable understanding of these works.

Three Examples of 4th Generation Digital Fiction

'The Big Plot'¹ created by Paolo Cirio is a “romantic spy-story played into the infosphere”. The story is told through four characters; Mark Savin a russian pilot, Brian Steiger a trained psychologist, Vanessa Pinney a canadian journalist and Paul Hampel a spy and a businessman. The story spreads out via various social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and Myspace as well as on microcontent sites like Wordpress, LiveJournal, Flickr and YouTube.

'Re: Dakar Arts Festival'² was created by KairUs. It emerged from a correspondence with internet scammers who were posing to arrange an art festival in Dakar. Three fictional characters: artist Heidi, gallerist Peter and his assistant Toni were created to investigate how the scam works. As in 'The Big Plot' the story is spread on multiple social media networks and on microcontent sites. Besides the characters created by the authors the scammers also introduced several personas into the story.

'Grace, Wit & Charm'³ is a comedy by Rob Wittig, performed as two live shows as well as online on the company website of the fictional Grace, Wit & Charm call center that offers solutions to “Turbo-Boost” their clients avatars. Trough twitter streams of the five main characters Sonny, Laura, Deb, Neil and Bob the reader could follow the story both prior and during the live shows.

Reading Social Media Literature

Social media literature uses our daily reading practices to deliver us stories. Similar tactics has been used e.g. by Bram Stoker's in his novel 'Dracula' (1897) or by John McDaid in 'Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse' (1986), one of the first mixed media novels. On the other hand to understand social media literature we need to recognize as Rob Wittig referring to 'Grace, Wit & Charm' that it “can be read as a live performance as it is published; it can also be read later as a fixed archive” [3].

Depending if social media literature is read in its “performance stage” or in its “archive stage” the reading experience differs. Hans Kristian Rustad suggests four approaches to understand how digital fiction can be read [4]. Of these four the “reading as self-reflection” and “the semantic orientation of reading” can be applied to our three examples of social media literature, the prior relating to the “performance stage” and the later to the “archive stage”.

According to Rustad “(t)he self-reflexive mode of reading is prefigured when the reader gets involved in a fictive character and begins to socialise with this character” [4]. Early

¹ thebigplot.net

² www.dakarartsfestival.net

³ robwit.net

on 'net.art' was experimenting with the potential of virtual personas. A fictional 'net.art' artist called 'Mouchette' is just one example of early fictional online characters. In 'Mouchettes' work 'Flesh&Blood' (1998) readers can contact her through an e-mail form. The possibility for readers to communicate with fictional characters is as well an essential part of social media literature. A number of readers of 'The Big Plot' created own side characters linking them to the plot. When the readers are aware that they communicate with fictional characters they involved themselves in a kind of role-play. In this case according to Rustad the pleasure of reading is “related to a self-enjoyment in the enjoyment of being someone else or being somewhere else” [4].

In the case of 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' readers involved in the “performance stage” were actually scammers. The story was published later and was therefore only actively promoted in its “archive stage”. In the “archive stage” the reader assume, as Rustad calls it “the semantic orientation of reading”, thriving for meaning-making. It is a goal oriented reading strategy where the aim is to understand the text. What comes to closure, Rustad suggest that this “quest for comprehension” ends when meaning has been found.

To conclude, in the “performance stage” social media fiction can be read in “self-reflective mode” and in the “archive stage” when the characters are no longer responsive the work is read in a “semantic orientation of reading”. As the title of this paper questions: can transmedia storytelling learn from hypertext fiction? I argue that hypertext fiction theory offers us an understanding of how we read social media fiction. By understanding how readers experience this type of fiction we are able to develop strategies to create new stories wether they are defined as transmedia stories or referring to the canon of digital fiction.

References

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