



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.¹ Sven Birkerts 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 that will engage and in some way overpower the reader; the reader goes to work to be subjected to the creative will of another.”² As we saw in chapter 1, like many readers with a slender experience of the medium, both critics assume that, if interactive narratives do not spell the Death of the Author that Roland Barthes described in his famous essay of that name, interactivity will diminish the author’s role, make it nearly irrelevant—a fear, as we discovered with the intentional network, 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* best-seller list or most of the books toted home by shoppers at Barnes and Noble represent the Great Works of the century, the titles that find their way onto college curricula and not ephemera that frequently go out of print and are forgotten by the decade’s end. 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 recently plunked copies of Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* onto 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 *Ulysses* or *Gravity's Rainbow* or any of the works by topographic or "difficult" writers, are mostly writers themselves, professors of English, or graduate students. And perhaps not even graduate students, as a student of mine once noted: Yeah, he'd read *Ulysses*—just not personally. If the distance yawning between the best-seller lists and the vestigial remains of the literary canon still dictating the Works That Count on university syllabi has not already brought home just how varied readers' tastes and habits are, surely a quick glance through inventories at Barnes and Noble or Amazon.com would forever destroy the myth of the Reader, that singular, educated entity who once queued at the docks or outside bookstores awaiting shipments of the latest from Dickens, Henry James, or Saul Bellow.

As we saw in chapter 1, readers enjoy the trancelike 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 Birkerts's and Miller's horror at the postmodern interactive barbarians at the gate: their educated reader exists on a continuum sandwiched somewhere to the right of your average consumer of Harlequin romances at the utterly pedestrian end of the scale but far to the left of readers tackling the likes of *Ulysses* on the difficult, demanding end. Simpler, highly conventionalized texts more completely absorb any reader's cognitive capacity for comprehension than difficult ones—with the depth of readers' immersion in fiction inversely proportional to the complexity and originality of the reading matter.³ Demands made on 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 trancelike pleasures of ludic reading. Far into the nineteenth century, reading fiction was seen as the equivalent to furtive sessions with the sherry, probably because readers became "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."⁴

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 entranced, immersive experience that satisfies our core desires for reading. Yet these texts also contain enough superficial and local complexity to render them interesting enough to engage readers more profoundly than genre novels and slick best-sellers while reading—and are sufficiently unchallenging to not demand the pauses and rereadings of most avant-garde and post-modern fiction. These features alone, however, are not sufficient to have earned novels by the likes of Austen and Flaubert regard from critics in every new generation, while the best-sellers of the last decades have vanished from reading lists, print, and memory.

In her study of the contribution of artificial intelligence to narratology, Marie-Laure Ryan distinguishes between vertical and horizontal motivations that drive narratives, two different relationships between the intentions that power and drive characters and plots alike. Motivation is vertical when it justifies the plot through ideas that transcend the narrative events, appealing to larger, social and philosophical categories familiar to readers but tangibly outside the confines of the story. In horizontal motivations, however, while some events might be subordinated to others, 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 that rely almost entirely on horizontal motivations, as well as of the novels that constitute the mainstream of literary fiction.⁵ 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 we read for pleasure. If narrative, as Bruner has suggested, is about “the vicissitudes of intention,”⁶ 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.”⁷ The ways in which interactive narratives map and yet do not 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 Schemata: 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* (1993)

Not surprisingly, in the early stages of any medium, few genres exist. During each medium's incunabular phase, moreover, a small number of genres flourish, wither, and die: between 1450 and 1500, the 20 million incunabular print 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 eighteenth century.⁸

More recently extinct in our own century: the kinetoscope shorts that represented fodder for nickelodeons, with the radio serials that once dominated the airwaves 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 that extend over weeks, months, or even years—temporarily vanished from primetime television during the sixties and early to mid-seventies when *The Munsters*, *The Brady Bunch*, *All in the Family*, *Barney Miller*, and even dramas like *The Waltons* alike focused mostly on microplots, dilemmas easily described, pursued, and resolved within each program's thirty-minute or hourly slot. Whereas 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 probably hoped viewers would return to programs because they identified with the characters, the particular milieus 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 since become a staple of network television.

Of course, macro- and microplots have long been the bricks and mortar of stories, dating back even to Homeric epics. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus struggles to return home safely to Penelope—the macro-

plot—battling against obstacles like the Cyclops and shipwreck on Ogygia—microplots that may also impact on the macroplot. While microplots involve their own smaller dilemmas, climaxes, and resolutions, their complications generally explicitly or implicitly threaten successful resolution of the macroplot. If Odysseus's crew caves in to temptation and slaughters Helios's cattle, their ship will be wrecked, and Odysseus may be left stranded—or possibly even dead—bringing the story of his 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 Ross's head. Carol Hathaway's reaction to Doug's quandary—will she back him up or censure him?—both affects the trajectory of the microplot and nudges closer to resolution one of the larger elements 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 Walter Kintsch and Teun 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 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' plans to attain goals—even when the particular goal may be 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 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 the police. 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 in a highly complex and roundabout way with Serb passenger Milos Jovanovic's goal of securing a 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 jeweled 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 microgoals. 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 ignited 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 *The Last Express* and "Twelve Blue" are made.

Beaugrande and Colby's relating storytelling rules to processes of comprehension is unusual because of their definition 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 among characters, actions, results, and reactions must be uncertain.⁹ 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” (49). Mystery stories derive much of their tortuous twists and rogues' galleries of suspects from this need, leading the narrative to encourage readers' misdirected suspicions in every direction possible until the stories' climax. Even in other, less intricately plotted genres, however, readers learn in detail about characters' aims and plans, leading them 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” (49). When in “Twelve Blue” Javier and his daughter, Beth, visit the hotel where its owner, Ed Stanko, possesses the only existing photograph of Javier's grandmother, we know enough about Stanko to 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 mad 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 recycling stories need not remove uncertainty 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 the likes of Robert Cath's goals and actions aboard the Orient Express. They occur on a different cognitive level from our processing information about Cath's status as a twenty-nine-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 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.¹⁰

Another complication—or reason we never tire of some stories—lies in the significant energy readers expend in anticipating the consequences of actions, events, and reactions throughout a narrative.¹¹ Further, as so many stories invite readers to anticipate murder, mayhem, love, and death, 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.¹² 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.”¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 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 that dance around the central conundrum of any homicide—the why—without our 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 tan-

gles her conviction that Stanko not only fathered her baby but may also be responsible for its death.

Millennium Story: Hypertext Fiction and the New Realism

[T]oday's most successful interactive artists ultimately see interactivity as an evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) step for storytelling.

—Brent Hurtig, "The Plot Thickens" (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, coincidentally, metaphorically, but never connect causally in a single overarching plot that brings the story into existence and offers the resolution that signifies its completion.¹⁵ Readers, instead, confront resolutions to some of "Twelve Blue"'s microplots, guided visually through a graphic interface that stands in for the narrative's macroplot: a drawing of twelve brightly colored threads representing "Twelve Blue"'s narrative strands, stacked horizontally in a frame divided into eight bars that symbolize the narrative's temporal axis (see fig. 10). As readers move through the text, they see only the segment of the graphic pertaining 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 curves upward to the very edge of the frame (see fig. 11).

While many postmodern writers have traded macroplots for a different set of complications and effects—those of the difficulties and dangers of narration, of the telling of stories itself—Joyce introduces an entirely different element into the writer's 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 bright threads swimming against a field of blue. Appearing alongside each screen of text, the threads trailing across every segment of the graphic act as tangible guides to the trajectory of micro- and macroplots alike, symbols of the ingredients of each narrative strand, as well as the primary mechanism by which readers move from link to

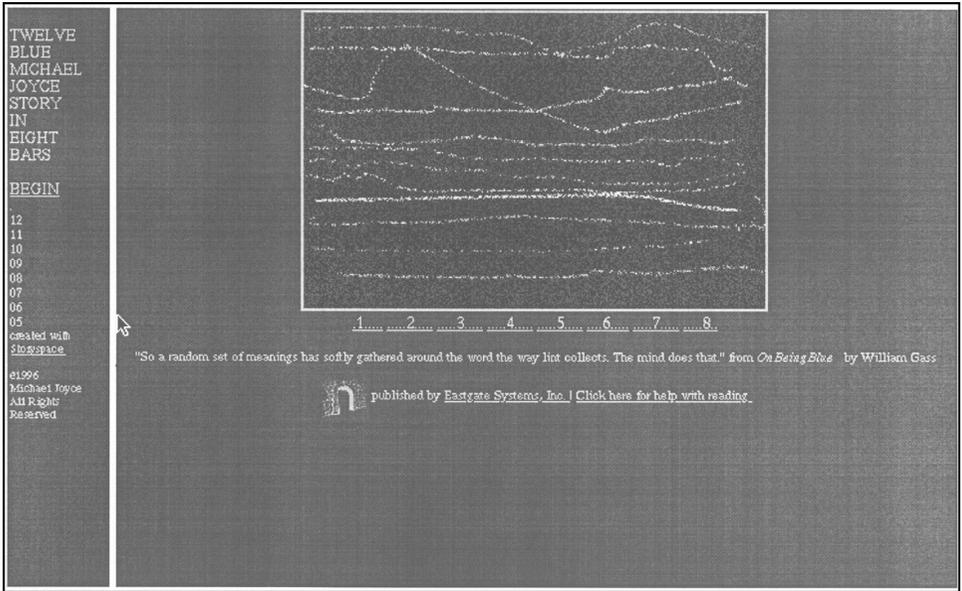


Fig. 10. Narrative skeins made visible: the graphic central to the “Twelve Blue” navigational interface.

link as they inch along the horizontal axis of the image, clicking on one of the colored threads.¹⁶ Chief among the distinct technical differences between the World Wide Web and 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 the surface of the story, one that offers glimpses of striking possibilities for the future of hypertext fiction.¹⁷

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 have 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,”¹⁸ a fiction that, as Joyce has imagined,

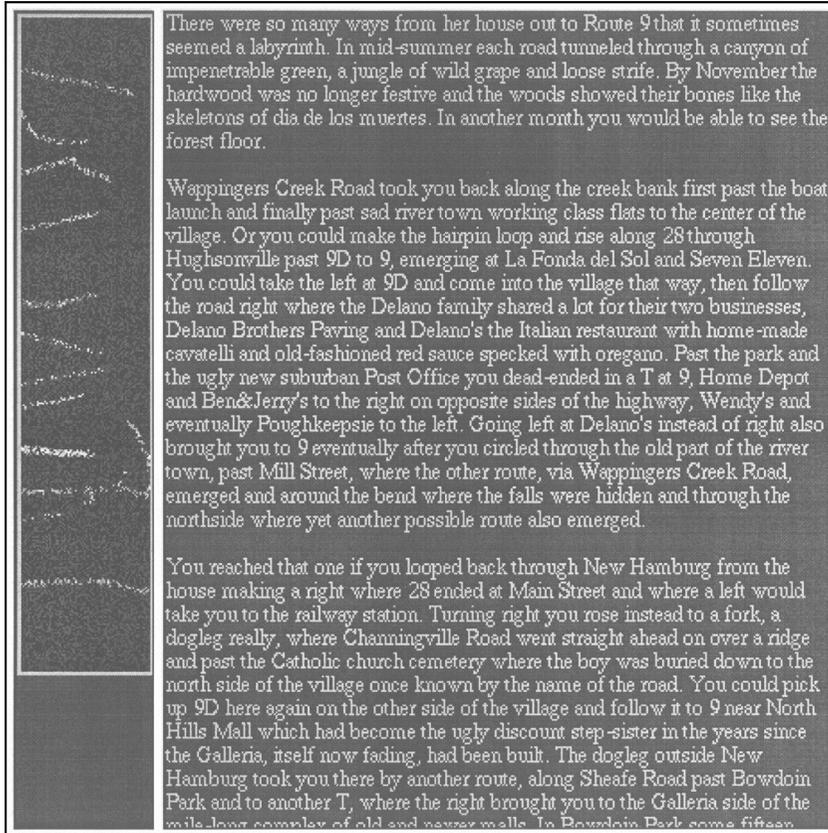


Fig. 11. No matter where you read in "Twelve Blue," the graphic to the left of the text orients you within one of the narrative's eight time frames, displaying the narrative skein you've selected relative to other strands.

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. . . . [It is] a narrative which can make sense of life as it is lived outside the regime of nextness . . . hypertextuality somehow represent[ing] the ordinarymindedness . . . of most people's lives.¹⁹

*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)

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 idiosyncrasies that enable readers to understand something of the protagonist's interior life, desires, goals.²⁰ One of the most admirable accomplishments of the New Journalism has been its relatively recent influence on nonfiction, for example, decidedly nonjournalistic 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 that 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 successful low-tech 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 daguerreotypes, or kinetoscopes, 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, and head-mounted devices for replacing the world before our eyes with one mostly fictitious, a 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, however, no matter how technologically sophisticated we make the medium, 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 the hero or the victim is going to make it to the next reel, we mostly believe that, whatever happens, they've got it coming to them. *We* would never have walked into the house, let alone traipsed down the basement stairs or stumbled and fallen down helplessly, wailing, before we are mown down. Digital narratives have long promised that we could come up with our own strategies, our own solutions, even some neat footwork while fleeing the horror of the moment. But games like *Obsidian*, *Myst*, *Midnight Stranger*, and *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 clichés that have marked the medium out mostly as turf for preteen boys and adults with the sensibilities of preteen 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 version, extremely costly to produce, 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 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 hustle the player along to the next test, a coming-of-age ritual reenacted 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 runty 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 readers could do on the island. And the reader as the protagonist had no looking-glass self in the text, no defined role within the narrative that blurred or rushed into focus depending on who you were interacting with, because there was no one around. You either successfully completed the tasks, the puzzles to solve and artifacts to recover, 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 extranarrative. You are entering a world expressly to pick up pieces, sort things out, and generally restore order, and, to accomplish these tasks, you have to abide by certain highly specific and particular rules. Until recently, 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 recent nudges and prods, finally making its first strides outside video arcade mode and into realms more familiar to cinemagoers 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 procedures and a hankering for a bloodless and stressless flirtation with directing an investigation themselves: scanning the coroner's report, analyzing blood spatter patterns and 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 Magic Death* and *Who Killed Brett Penance?* place all the usual tools of homicide investigations in readers' hands, including a sidekick who guides you through the ropes, hints at recommended strategies for interviewing suspects, and occasionally gives you the skinny on 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 interviewing suspects, limited to questions in your notebook that you can choose to ask each one. 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 amount and importance of the data you receive. Since interviews with suspects merely trigger well-acted video clips, moreover, the characters just respond to the question, or to the generic role you are temporarily filling, the detective on the trail of an arrest warrant, and not to any modicum of personality the detective may possess—a far cry from the long line of colorful detectives that extends from Philip Marlowe to Patricia Cornwell's Virginia West. Still, Gilligan's series considerably extends the narrative complexity and pleasures of a single mystery narrative by offering in *The Magic Death* three different perpetrators

to nail and in *Who Killed Taylor French?* and *Who Killed Brett Penance?* three entirely different crime scenes, three perpetrators' modus operandi to analyze, and, of course, three culprits. In the age of obsolescence, remarkably, Gilligan's narratives considerably extend the shelf life of your typical mystery, which readers usually consume quickly and which is seldom suitable for rereading 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—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 correspondence 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 mission of recovering the stolen rare original of *The Rubáiyat* and a notebook recording the identities and whereabouts of the Bolsheviks. Brush off tireless and tiresome 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 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' 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 will send you on your way. Like-

wise, 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."²¹ And, as I noted in chapter 1, if you decline to pick up clues that include Russian dolls and telegrams and negatives lying on dark-room trays, you are 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 époque 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 musical 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 homogeneity of airports, shopping malls, and hotels the world over—it is partially what catapulted the film *Titanic* to success, what still makes a transatlantic crossing aboard *Queen Elizabeth 2* the sort of event travelers describe reverently. It is 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's 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 from the station, a motorcycle races alongside it and Robert Cath neatly and unobtrusively boards the Orient Express with a leap from the behind the motorcycle's driver onto the train. Once he's aboard, however, the opening animation ends and 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 cartoonlike 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 insinuate 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 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 will 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 will 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 duffel 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 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 have 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 in progress on which you can keep tabs through periodic snoopings in Compartment E, the current entry summarizing the untimely departure of Robert Cath from the Orient Express, seen from the perspectives of Norton 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

Starship Titanic 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 1, and you will watch Cath strain to pick him up and lay him on the banquette. Leave the body on the banquette, and the conductor will discover him, haul on the emergency cord, and summon *les gendarmes*. Hide the body in the made-up bed, and you will need to scuttle back quickly to the room before the conductor arrives to make the bed up for the night, so that you can toss Tyler's body out onto the tracks. Or, if you point to the window, open it, and heave the body in that general direction, your pal's corpse flies out onto the tracks between Paris and Epernay, the tidiest solution—and one that leaves you with a bloodstained jacket. Point to the jacket hanging above the banquette, however, and Cath seizes it, swaps it for the now bloodstained 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 have 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, without, however, the strictly voyeuristic role we fill as we watch films. 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.²²

Not surprisingly, many of the branches are tracks to failure. Open the door to the conductor before you have had a chance to dispose of Tyler, and he will see Whitney's body, stop the train, and have you arrested. Fail to hide when two gendarmes search the train at Epernay, and you will be arrested for the murder of Whitney, whose body has been recovered from the tracks where you have chucked it. 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. Whereas 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* enables you to back up and pursue 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 menace Kahina as she breaks into Wolff's compartment while 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 jeweled firebird egg for Prince Kronos's 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—as Kronos hurries away with the firebird and the train puffs onward to Constantinople—leaving unsolved and unresolved virtually all of the conundrums you have encountered during the narrative.

The gamelike 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 idiosyncrasies of other passengers, the fragments of Joyce's "ordinarymindedness" that flesh out the narrative and comprise more than half of its content.²³ 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' quarrel. Norton's diary functions like a one-woman Greek chorus, only her observations are strictly limited to what Norton sees, hears, and values, and this particular chorine 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 Boutarels' table at dinner and you will 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 will find yourself in Cath's shoes, so to speak, listening to a stream of Arabic, sans subtitles, since Cath neither speaks nor understands that language.

Ordinarymindedness 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 not resolve into any single 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 to make 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.²⁴

While Janet Murray bemoans digital narratives' shallow branching structures and disproportionate emphasis on visuals over storytelling (212), 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 and not strictly purposive 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 we mostly forget made to us aboard trains, snatches of conversation like the anti-Semitic aside August Schmidt issues almost immediately after his fawning over Anna Wolff that reveal still more to us of a character we have already decided is distasteful from our brief encounters with him. 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 does not play out quite as he planned.²⁵

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 are 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 prattles 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 point out, the richness of local detail in narratives cannot be fully processed and retained, leading us to reread narratives rich in small, "throwaway" 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's sketching them out for us in words—yet another example of Wolfe's realism squared.²⁶ 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 is not 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* (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 real-time 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 narrative, adventure, mystery, thriller, or romance lie words, the scripts that can render characters lifelike and memorable, the scenes and details that we recall long after we have forgotten the way the thing ends. While it is possible to make a terrible film from an excellent script, it is virtually impossible to turn a hackneyed script into a watchable film, just as all the whizzy animation and three-dimensional modeling in the world cannot salvage a poorly scripted interactive narrative consisting mostly of swordplay or where the outcome to the narrative is inevitably the same, no matter what paths you take or choices you make as you work through it. This, surely, is not the secondary orality with which Ong concludes *Orality and Literacy*, 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 subscript—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 encounter.

As oxymorons go, scripted orality is a fitting label for media and genres themselves rich in paradox. For realism that becomes more real the more it is manufactured. For stories that require more writing than print novels in the form of dialogue, narrative scripts, and scripted interactions that tether story firmly to a spectrum of potential readerly interactions with the text. 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 can also physically reify and make palpable their authors' intentions even as they offer their readers a freedom impossible in print.

This future may be closer than even the techno-enthusiasts imagine. One of the novels shortlisted for the 1998 Booker Prize—arguably the United Kingdom's most notable literary award—was *The Angels of Russia* by Patricia Le Roy, published by the firm Online Originals, which offers thirty-three titles over the Internet, available for downloading to your PC or PalmPilot for the princely sum of roughly seven dollars. While acknowledging that *Angels of Russia* did not exactly match the definition of "book" listed in the Booker Prize rules that more or less restrict books to pages sandwiched between covers, Booker administrator Martyn Goff reviewed the title, which eventually made its way onto the Booker shortlist—on pages printed on paper, couriered over from Internet publisher and delivered by hand.²⁷

The book is dead. Long live the book—whatever its form.