How Networked Communication has changed the ways we tell stories

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> Men standing in opposite hemispheres will converse and deride each other and embrace each other, and understand each other's language.
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> Leonardo Da Vinci

> Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.
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> Hannah Arendt

In the midst of the digital revolution, we are confronted with the task of defining how media will change our lives and how we communicate with each other in the years to come. Narrative, as one of the most ancient communication tools, has undergone substantial structural changes. This paper addresses how these changes impact the way we read and write. Does the same story conveyed through different media channels signify in the same manner? In other words, what are the differences between a printed story and a digitally presented one? Have electronic reader devices altered the way stories are told and created? And how is networked communication changing the ways we tell stories? Empowered by technological advancements, any reader now has the ability to become an author, publishing her ideas in blogs, revising encyclopaedia entries in Wikipedia, creating her own fictional world in virtual communities. Can we talk about the

existence of narrative in this new environment, or has it metamorphosed into what Henry Jenkins has defined as "transmedia storytelling"? While presenting some narrative examples which fit Jenkins' definition, this paper also aims to discuss possible future developments and opportunities for new, experimental forms of storytelling. Better the reader be aware though that not all the above questions will be extensively answered in these pages, they are in fact the basis of a larger project that I can only sketch out here.

"Everything, in the world, exists to end up in an e-book"

In an article entitled "The Many Futures of the Book" (Notaro 2012) I traced the fascinating history of the e-book reader, from its prophetic anticipations in works of science fiction and the futurist aspirations of modernists artists and writers until "a clunking machine known as Memex" designed by the American engineer Vannevar Bush appeared in 1945[1]. The pre-Kindle era includes many false starts and speculative projects which have attempted to disrupt and innovate the printed book through new media – the Sony's Data Discman (1990); the SoftBook, the Rocket eBook (1998), and the eBookMan (1999), to name a few. However, the recent popularization of tablets and e-readers, the emergence of commercial platforms for production, distribution and sharing of e-books, and the ongoing digitalization of printed archives suggest that while digital technology has been integrated into print publishing processes for decades, a profound material reformation of how books are produced, distributed, and experienced is taking place. Hence, it is hardly surprising that controversies around intellectual property, privacy, sustainability, reading (distraction/attention), authorship and the fundamental status of the book as an epistemological object regularly arise. The question of how to account for the difference between reading a text on a computer screen and reading a text on a printed page is a particularly controversial one. Keith Doubt in his "Ebooks, Deep

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[1] What I omitted to include in such history were seven fascinating book machines, among which the "Book Wheel" by Captain Agostino Ramelli (1588). See Kowalczyk 2014.

Reading, and Cultural Lag" (2013) resurrects sociologist George H. Mead's 1934 distinction between the two parts of the self, the "I" (the impulsive and instinctive nature of the self) and the "me" (the self's ability to take the role of another) to assume that e-books encourage reading with the self's "I" while print media encourage reading with the self's "me". For example:

> ebooks encourage reading that reflects efficiency, productivity, and enjoyment. Readers are more quick, more impulsive, and more free to explore the text and its surrounding hyperlinks and advertisement in the digital world online. … Reading becomes a skimming activity. Readers browse.
>
> In contrast, print media encourages reading with the self's "me." Readers take the role of different characters in a work of fiction as well as the role of the author who develops these characters. … Readers are slower and more reflective. (*Ibid.*)

Having identified such a clear distinction, Doubt, true to his name, casts uncertainty upon it only a couple of paragraphs later when he recognizes that:

> To be honest, it is not that reading with the "me" does not occur with digital media. Either way of reading may occur with either print or digital media. Kindle, for example, transfers the idea of the book from print media to digital media. The book as a structure in which reading interaction occurs still exists. Kindle is a simulacrum of what the book is. Words are pixels rather than ink. (*Ibid.*)

Doubt's candid acknowledgement that the impact of digital media on reading culture might be more complex than it first appears is in sharp contrast with the tone of unassailable uprightness typical of critics of the internet like Nicholas Carr who, in "Is Google making us Stupid?" (2008) – where the question mark is merely rhetorical posturing – laments the loss of deep reading (and deep thinking), while sharing with playwright Richard Foreman the fear that «we risk turning into 'pancake people'—spread wide and thin as we connect

with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button» (*ibid.*). Culinary metaphors aside, Carr's anxieties regarding the distractions of the digital environment - also articulated in his later book *The Shallows* (2011) – are refuted by David Dowling, author of "Escaping the Shallows: Deep Reading Revival in the Digital Age" (2014).

Taking as a premise Henry Jenkins' percipient observation that «it is simplistic to assume that technologies can support only one mindset» (*ibid.*: 6) associated with scanning and skimming, Dowling focuses his attention on online reading communities to conclude that not only they «have seized the tools of social media for deep reading» (*ibid.*), thus engaging in «both deep reading and immersion in the extreme» (*ibid.*) but also:

> Internet readers of immersive narrative reflect a completeness of experience that inspires rather than silences discussion, draws out rather than erases the individual reading experience, and socializes rather than isolates the pastime of media consumption. (*Ibid.*: 12)

For Dowling online culture has actually enhanced the appreciation of longer, richer works through its support of "radial reading" as proposed by McGann, «the person who temporarily stops 'reading' to look up the meaning of a word is properly an *emblem* of radial reading because that kind of 'radial' operation is repeatedly taking place even while one remains absorbed with a text» (*ibid.*: 19). This type of reading, Dowling argues:

> has never been so rich and rewarding as in the context of the online ecosystem, with its readily available search engines and social media tools. SMS drives such radial reading in an apparent paradox in which brief messaging can aid rather than truncate deep understandings and experiences of longer texts, leading to further interaction among readers through tools such as email that allow for longer nuanced expression. (*Ibid.*)

Dowling's analysis of online reading communities is persuasive enough. I wish to add to the insights offered so far into the debate about the current culture of reading I Read Where I Am, (2013) a publication by designer Mieke Geeritzen and media theorist Geert Lovink with Minke Kampman, which contains visionary texts about the future of reading and the status of the word[2]. Starting from the consideration that «We read anytime and anywhere. We read on screens, we read out on the streets, we read in the office but less and less we read a book at home on the couch» (*ibid.*). The editors posit that «We are, or are becoming, a different type of reader. The question remains which shape will it take and what experience does one want?» (*ibid.*). Crucially, the publication's aim is «to look further than the current hype around the iPads and Kindles» and to invite the 82 contributors (artists, critics, and designers) to «speculate about the significance and importance of new forms of image-text in the future» in order to offer «a guideline for the following generations of 'reading machines'» (*ibid.*).

I haven't the space here to dwell at length on the many penetrating observations offered in this book, besides recalling Lev Manovich's claim in his text "From Reading to Pattern Recognition" that rather than a personal affair, reading has become a communicative process. I would argue that reading has always been a communicative process, only the internet has offered an expanded context for it to occur, a context perfectly apt for exploiting the already inherently "social" character of literary culture. Word of mouth recommendations find their Web 2.0 equivalent in online communities of readers like Goodreads, with the added bonus that the latest Kindle (the current Paperwhite model is to be superseded by the Voyage one in November 2014) integrates the above mentioned book-centric social network among its features. Also, the built-in Wi-Fi and 3G allows readers to see what their friends are reading, share highlights and rate books not

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[2] There has been a lot of research on digital as against analogue reading, and the results are decidedly mixed. See Jabr 2013 for a summary of recent findings.

only in the context of the Goodreads platform, but on Facebook and Twitter as well[3]. As John Paul Titlow notes in his "Keep your Social Networking out of my book" (2013) the new social reading environments do not «amount to a full-blown, Facebook-inside-your-book type of experience» yet, «but the line between social networks and books is only now beginning to blur» hence, he warns: «Prepare to get even more distracted» (*ibid.*). Even a self confessed paper-loving e-reader holdout like the technology writer Michael Grothaus can't fail to envisage a future where «e-books are going to explode beyond just containing stories, becoming niche social networks where we discuss our favorite passages with other readers and even authors and publishers buy our data to make more informed decisions» (Grothaus 2013). So, Grothaus emphatically concludes: «hold on tight, book lovers. Reading as we know it will soon change, forever» (*ibid.*).

It is not only reading that is changing of course, but storytelling itself. More and more «Top writers look to ebooks to challenge the rules of fiction» (Thorpe 2013), among such writers are: Iain Pearse (author of the digital novel Arcadia, 2013) and Blake Morrison, who sees the success of experimental e-books as depending «on making interactivity more than just a feature » (*ibid.*). Morrison aptly reminds us that «Reading by its very nature is interactive – whether you do it on an iPad or with a printed book, you participate…The novelist creates a world and the reader brings something to it. Reading is not a passive process» (*ibid.*). While linearity is still recognized by Will Smith as having «some unavoidable traction for the reader» (endowed with what McLuhan termed "Gutenberg mind") publishers like Faber &

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[3] A competitor of the *Goodreads*-Amazon alliance was the independent start app *Readmill*, which made each and every book its own self-contained social network. However *Readmill* «failed to create a sustainable platform for reading» and was absorbed by Dropbox in March 2014. See the *Readmill* "Epilogue" https://readmill.com/ Also, the closure of *Readmill* has been linked to the evolution of post-print culture, or what Marshall McLuhan called "the second orality" (Nawotka 2014).

Faber are now urging leading writers to work together with software developers in order to supersede e-books, «a boring format that just comes straight out of normal books» (*ibid.*).

The answer to the e-books' uninspiring format is provided by the tablet, a multi-functional device that supports a wide range of media, thus opening up new storytelling opportunities and eroding the e-reader dominance. According to the *Adobe Digital Marketing* Report published in 2013, people read at greater length on tablets than on other devices, hence «tablets could be the device responsible for getting more people to dive deep into stories» (PSFK 2014). Even in this new context though writers and designers are faced by the recurrent question of the reader's distraction, that is whether the conscious act of clicking or tapping on links that hyperfiction requires is disturbing the reading experience or, as Mez Breeze, a digital artist and co-creator of #Carnivast, an interactive electronic literature application, believes:

> The act of reading has now become acceptably segmented, immersive and interactive all at the same time. Nowadays, we don't just sit passively and absorb a book or text: many of us read with the key desire to broadcast our own opinion/comments/tweets regarding the material [or even our own creative take in case of fan fiction]. (Sano 2013)

Perhaps Damien Walter's prediction of what a fully networked reading experience will look like in the future is not so far fetched after all:

> Imagine reading a book published in 2013 in the year 2063. In the 50 years between now and then, dozens of critical texts, hundreds of articles, thousands of reviews and hundreds of thousands of comments will have been made on the text. In a fully networked reading experience, all of those will be available to the reader of the book from within the text… Authors are able to shape the discussion on their books, moderating comments in a system similar to a blogpost… And perhaps most interesting of

all, readers can find each other through the books they read. (Walter 2013)

What is certain is that in an age of significant uncertainties with regards to publishing practices, artists, authors and designers have begun exploring new possibilities and re-configurations of bookwork. Critical and exploratory projects have addressed questions of access, creativity and epistemological questions at the intersections of language and machine processing, drawing from histories of avant-garde practice, artist's books, and subcultural production. The *Ghost Writers'* project for example has unleashed a small army of bots designed to flood the Kindle e-book store with texts comprised entirely of YouTube comments. Its aim was «to address and identify pertinent questions concerning the digital publishing industry's business models, as well as to draw the lines of new trends for a possible new kind of digital literature, after the web» (GhostWriters 2012).

Also, the project wanted to raise questions like:

who do YouTube videos/comments belong to? Where does authorship start and end? To what extent does the e-book format have to be reconsidered with regard to the traditional book form, and what are its most innovative opportunities? How could we act and work on it? (*Ibid.*)

Likewise, engagements with print have become increasingly experimental by reflexively harnessing the materialities of paper, while translating and twisting software-based techniques into challenging neo-analog compositions. One of the most intriguing projects is *On the Upgrade*, a series of publications resulting from the activities of online exhibition platform or-bits.com. In this case, the contribution is the way in which the "book exhibition" is considered an interface which, according to *Rhizome* editor Orit Gat, «seems pretty radical, especially for an organization that publishes online» (Gat 2013). But is it really as radical as it seems?

As far as the established tradition of the artist's book is concerned, the most interesting potential for development does not lie in its recent impersonation as artist's e-book. Publisher James Bridle argues convincingly that:

> We're not going to find new opportunities by aping the old forms in a new media: the most interesting literary experiments I've seen are taking place fully entwined with the new media, embedded in blogs, wikis and services like Twitter, products of those cultures rather than interventions in them. (Hromack 2011)

While not denying that «artists' ebooks are a totally viable thing», Bridle maintains that «they seem to be a very small subset of what an artist or experimental writer could be doing with electronic technology, and of less interest than either a traditional artists' book, or a more networked approach.» For him «the magic is in the network» (*ibid.*).

This seems to be a time when apparently contrasting dynamics - the "post-digital" (Ludovico 2012) and the "aesthetic of bookishness" (Pressman 2009) - intersect and crossover between media, thus reflecting the complex hybridity and paradoxical status of the book today.

For Pressman "the aesthetic of bookishness" is:

> an emergent literary strategy that speaks to our cultural moment. These novels exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies. They define the book as an aesthetic form whose power has been purposefully employed by literature for centuries and will continue to be far into the digital age. (Pressman 2009)

The paradox of such a notion is that it took the perceived death of the book to bring it into existence, in fact:

> as the codex cedes its dominance as a form of information access to other media formats, book-bound content becomes more associated with the literary. Thus, the presumed and much-prognosticated death of the book just might prove beneficial to literature and,… to experimental literature in particular. (*Ibid.*)

In conclusion, no matter whether this is the "Late Age of Print" (Striphas 2009) or the "Postprint Era" (Hayles - Pressman 2013) it is plausible that print won't disappear, instead «the ideologies associated with print are transforming, at greater or lesser speeds, into something else – ways of thinking native to digital media (Hayles in Leman 2013).

Personally, I have always found the notion of the terminal demise of certain media (the book) only to be superseded by new ones as too teleological, as I discussed in "The Many Futures of the Book" (2012) I believe the situation to be far more complex. In particular, Derrida's insights into the continued existence and ongoing transformations of the book as object and idea in the context of media developments such as the Web and Web 2.0 are far more interesting. Amazon's Kindle has certainly brought the question of the future of the book to the fore, and one might be forgiven for paraphrasing Mallarmé famous dictum – Everything, in the world, exists in order to end up in a book (1895) – as the epigraph to this section does. And yet, just like Mallarmé never wrote his *Livre*, everything might not end up in an e-book after all, but dispersed in multiple, rhizomatic networks where storytelling can better work its magic.

After nourishment, shelter and companionship,

stories are the thing we need most in the world.

(Philip Pullman)

Writing in 2007 Marie-Laure Ryan noted how in the past fifteen years, «the 'narrative turn in the humanities' gave way to the narrative turn everywhere», her lucid exposition of the then current (but still valid today) state of affairs is worth quoting at length:

few words have enjoyed so much use and suffered so much abuse as *narrative* and its partial synonym, *story*. The French theorist Jean-François Lyotard invokes the "Grand Narratives" of a capitalized History; the psychologist Jerome Bruner speaks of narratives of identity; the philosopher Daniel Dennett describes mental activity on the neural level as the continuous emergence and decay of narrative drafts; the political strategist James Carville attributes the loss of John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election to the lack of a convincing narrative; and "narratives of race, class and gender" have become a mantra of cultural studies. Gerald Prince regards the contemporary use of the term narrative as a hedging device, a way to avoid strong positions: "One says 'narrative' instead of 'explanation' or 'argumentation' (because it is more tentative); one prefers 'narrative' to 'theory,' 'hypothesis,' or 'evidence' (because it is less scientistic); one speaks of a 'narrative' rather than 'ideology' (because it is less judgmental); one substitutes 'narrative' for 'message' (because it is more indeterminate)." Another narrative theorist, Peter Brooks, attributes the surging popularity of the word to a more positive cause: "While I think the term has been trivialized through overuse, I believe the overuse responds to a recognition that narrative is one of the principal ways we organize our experience of the world - a part of our cognitive tool kit that was long neglected by psychologists and philosophers." (Ryan 2007: 22)

Ryan is right in drawing attention to the often interchangeable use of narrative and story, which are not exactly synonyms, in fact the distinction between the two terms goes as far back as to Aristotelian *Poetics*. 4 However, I am not sure that the word narrative has been "trivialized through overuse" as she contends, I believe that its persistent popularity is symptomatic of its enduring relevance. Philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre, far from neglecting it, even claim that an understanding of narrative history is a prerequisite for any

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4 For the sake of economy in this paper I refer mostly to the term storytelling, deferring the deep question of narrative/story distinction for another time.

understanding of human actions: «man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal… I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'» (Carter 2014). Most recently support for the value of fiction has arrived from psychology (a study has found that reading fiction significantly increased empathy towards others (Delistraty 2014) and from the unexpected quarter of neuroscience (Paul 2012), thus supporting the hypothesis that Evolution has «wired our brains for storytelling» (Widrich 2012).

So Henry James was wrong when he maintained in "The Art of Fiction" (1884), that fiction was *merely* a personal "impression of life", there is something deeper and more fundamental to it, narrative simulations are a form of existential problem-solving for the individual and the whole community (somewhat akin to what McLuhan had in mind with the idea of the global village). Walter Benjamin famously declared that narrative could not survive the "excessive knowingness of modern times" (Benjamin, 1969)[5], however Benjamin, like James, failed to appreciate two of narrative's key qualities which, according to Caroline Bassett (2007), explain its longevity well into the twenty-first century: contingency and mutability As Bassett convincingly put it, «Narrative is at the heart of…everyday culture within a world where digital technology is becoming pervasive. To consider contemporary narrative formations is to engage with contemporary techno-culture» (*ibid.*: 8).

Such a view is echoed by Stanford university scholar Lucy Bernholz in her blog post dedicated to Storytelling. Bernholz writes: «Even as technology becomes ubiquitous, embedded, and smart we still need stories. In fact, we need them more than ever» (Bernholz 2011). In order to prove her point she offers a useful overview of contemporary efforts from Flipoard - which lets you curate your own magazine on your iPad to My Life is True - which presents two minute

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[5] Benjamin also sees the rise of the novel and its "dependence on the book" as evidence of the decline of storytelling.

stories, including a reference to the concept of gamification and to how it ties in with storytelling[6].

I mentioned above how narrative simulations are a form of existential problem-solving for the individual and the whole community, linking the two aspects is at the core of the *Center for Digital Storytelling* whose mission statement reads: "To promote the value of story as a means for compassionate community action." (http://storycenter.org/) While the Center helps organizations of all kinds tell their stories using digital tools, the term "digital storytelling" has come to refer to the broader world of computer-mediated narrative. Already in 2002 Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp in *New Screen Media* described this broader new world as one of "narrative chaos", in which frameworks are being exchanged for experimental and radical attempts to master anew the art of story telling, with the aid of developing technologies.

> Traditional media has been augmented by the advent of new media, not just trough the revolutionary distributive aspects of the technology, but principally through the changed relationship between audience and author. New media forms offer both a convergence of narrative vehicles and a fragmentation of understood forms. (Rieser - Zapp 2002: xxvi)

This is also a world, in the words of media scholar Henry Jenkins, «where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate

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[6] For a list of free Storytelling apps see: http://shambles.net/pages/learning/ict/apps_story/. For a definition of gamification I refer the reader to (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke 2011).

media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways» (Jenkins 2006: 2-4).

I would agree with the definition of "narrative chaos", provided that one intends the term chaos not in its literal Greek etymology of an abyss which is vast and empty, or in the later (from 1600 onwards) popular meaning of order-less confusion, but rather as a moment of *boundless generative potential.* Such generative potential expresses itself in a narrative «that's told through many media at once in a way that is nonlinear, that is participatory and gamelike , and that is designed to be immersive» (Rose 2011: 4). Unsurprisingly, such narrative chaos is paralleled by an aesthetic chaos in that, as Henry Jenkins himself acknowledges:

> We do not yet have very good aesthetic criteria for evaluating works that play themselves out across multiple media. There have been far too few fully transmedia stories for media makers to act with any certainty about what would constitute the best uses of this new mode of storytelling. (Jenkins 2006: 98)

Jenkins is also credited for popularizing the term "transmedia storytelling," to be understood as «a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience» (Jenkins 2007)[7].

Erica Negri (2014) rightly observes that Jenkins defines such term as a *process*, thus implying its application to fields beyond the narrative one, to my mind however the term process in this context also confirms

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[7] An antecedent to contemporary transmedia practices is "Japan's 'media mix' strategy, «based on the idea that a single story can be told through several different media at once.» It «emerged in the seventies, decades before Western publishers or producers saw the potential for any kind of synergistic storytelling» Rose 2011: 41. For a study of transmedia storytelling in different historical periods and countries, see Scolari – Bertetti - Freeman 2014.

the expanded generative potential of this kind of narratives.[8] Such potential manifests itself in a multitude of projects that would be too long to enumerate,[9] I just wish to refer the reader to the short list collated by academic and broadcaster Aleks Krotoski (2011) which includes, among others, the *Blair Witch Project* (1999) that exploited to perfection the Web's viral capacity for creating buzz and, perhaps more interestingly, the *We Tell Stories* (2008) project. (http://www.wetellstories.co.uk/) In the latter case Penguin publishing commissioned six writers to tell stories using digital media in innovative ways (Google Maps, infographics, blogs, Twitter, email and reader-driven plotlines). A year earlier Penguin had launched, in collaboration with students at De Montfort University in Leicester (UK), another innovative storytelling project *A Million Penguins* (2007). The plan was to create over the month of February the world's first 'wiki' (collaborative) novel. Writing in a blog post for *the Guardian* in March 2007 Kate Pullinger, one of the co-ordinators, notes how fascinating it was «to see how a feeling of solidarity grows between people who have never met and who know nothing about each other but who have a common purpose». While the *A Million Penguins'* catchline was: Can a community write a novel? Maybe, Pullinger perceptively suggests, the question should have been:

> Can a community write a narrative? The project shows that groups can collaborate and can write a multiplicity of stories, but perhaps it's too much to expect such a large community (nearly

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[8] Jenkins delves deeper into the concept of transmedia storytelling in his blog post "Transmedia Storytelling 101" (Jenkins 2007).

[9] The recent BBC's *Sherlock* TV series is a very interesting example, see (Reif 2014). For articles exploring the creative and technical achievements of transmedia storytelling consider (Milburn 2014).

> 1,500 contributors) to come up with a single, cohesive narrative in such a short space of time. Building communities takes time. (Pullinger 2007)

In any case, although the chaos was "exhausting", excellent ideas were generated and Pullinger concludes her post by celebrating the chaos or, as she put it, «to use the lingo - the "bounded instability"» (*ibid.*). Musing about the project five years later, on the occasion of her recent experience as external examiner for a PhD thesis on the Networked Book, Pullinger still recalls the "chaos and the entertainment", however she laments the fact that not all the wiki pages created could be archived. Another unwelcome development with regards to the evolution of the networked book as a concept is that contemporary social media marketing campaigns

> aim to foster reader engagement around a newly published book, whereas the networked books of the noughties all sought to foster creative engagement with text and other forms of media. The networked book emphasis was on collaboration and contributing, whereas, of necessity, a trade publishing networked social media campaign is about sales. (Pullinger 2012)

Kate Pullinger's own *ouvre* - she is the author, with digital artist Chris Joseph, of the much acclaimed transmedia novel *Inanimate Alice* (2005-) and of *Flight Path: a Networked Novel* (2007-) - shows that it is perfectly possible to convey profound stories using digital media in unique and compelling ways[10].

A good story will always capture the audience's imagination, but what about the transmedia audiences' own expectations? What kind of multi-media reading "experience" do they wish for? To answer these questions, *Latitude*, an international research consultancy interviewed 158 early adopters and compiled a report in 2012 that forms the first phase of its the *Future of Storytelling* project. (http://www.futureofstorytellingproject.com/) The expectations are

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[10] More about Pullinger's work at http://www.katepullinger.com/

summarized as "The 4 I's": Immersion, Interactivity, Integration and Impact. Essentially, readers want to be able to explore a story in greater depth, and have it reach out of the confines of a single medium and play out in "the real world".

Even though the sample of "early adopters" surveyed is not very broad, the findings are extremely interesting, particularly with regards to the audience's yearning for more interativity and immersion. The transmedia ebook *Shuffle* (2013) is one of those titles that, at least in part, attempt to meet such expectations. According to its author (and digital producer) Chris Rickaby, the aim was «to push boundaries» and «to have a vision of a very different way to structure a novel-narrative across multiple platforms» (DBW 2013)[11]. The ebook consists of seven stories that can be read in any order the reader chooses, the plot and the ending are determined accordingly. The reader can use the mechanism of an iPod playlist to shuffle between songs that are linked to the different stories. There is also a website, www.Lulzlit.com which pretends to represent a collective of writers, the supposedly real authors of the project. So, the book one could *shuffle* also produced an online fictional alter-ego for Chris Rickaby (James T. Raydel) and spread out onto online platforms like YouTube, Pinterest and Twitter (for the seven writers/characters). Rickaby also envisages for the seven characters to give minute-long book readings on YouTube because «if publishers want to engage the next generation of readers, they absolutely have to develop online avenues.» (Cornish 2013) Although *Shuffle* won the Publishing Innovation Award for best ebook fiction from Digital Book World at the 2013 Digital Book World Conference and was also a finalist in the transmedia category at the Publishing Innovation Awards (DBW 2013) Rickaby is well aware that it «will be

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[11] Another equally interesting example is Nina Munteanu's *Outer Diverse* (2011) published in print form and e-format; it then appeared in audio format also. Its trailer is on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOIQNeIHVks while the author intended to produce a short story musical, a graphic novel and an interactive vid. (Munteanu 2013)

all about finding the right audience online. Marmite fiction might be a good way to describe it. Some love it, but others have been left a little baffled by stories that you are meant to shuffle» (*ibid*.).

The "Marmite factor" Rickaby refers to can be ascribable to the fact that transmediality, in spite of the definition offered above, is still a rather nebulous concept, one that can be applied to the latest Hollywood blockbuster as well as to the more experimental works of electronic fiction, for which a specific tool-kit of technical and mental skills is required. Janet Murray in her seminal *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1998) envisioned a half hacker/half bard storyteller of the future telling stories in a medium that will «reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework» (*ibid.*: 9-10). Such new framework, I would suggest, is now here, and it is one that suitably reflect our socially-networked culture.

"For sale. Baby shoes. Never used"

Ernest Hemingway (1920)

The story goes that in the 1920s Ernest Hemingway's colleagues bet him that he couldn't write a complete story in just six words. In the end they paid up and Hemingway is said to have considered "For sale. Baby shoes. Never used" his best work. No matter whether the American writer, famous for his terse and concise style, wrote it or not,[12] the scope here is to propose that the Internet has not invented flash fiction[13] (also known as: micro fiction, micro narrative, micro-story, postcard fiction, short short story, and sudden fiction), rather it has followed and expanded upon a trend that has its roots in Aesop's

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[12]   Apparently   the   story   is   apocryphal.   See http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/01/28/baby-shoes/

[13] The first *Flash Fiction* anthology was published in 1992, a year before the World Wide Web became available to the public (Thomas, J. Thomas, D. Hazuka, T. 1992).

Fables and ancient Japanese *Zen* stories. More accurately perhaps one should argue that the Internet (including micro-blogging sites like Twitter) is actually bringing about new forms of very short fiction, as the examples below demonstrate.

As Brian Alexander puts it «Twitter might appear to be the least likely storytelling platform of all... its reputation as a site for trivial pseudo-conversation should preclude meaning and narrative» (Alexander 2011: 61). Besides, the limitation of one hundred and forty characters for a "tweet" (due to the start up initial incarnation as a mobile phone text messaging service) should exacerbate narrative inhibitions, and yet here lies «Twitter paradox: maximum freedom through ultimate constraint» (Rose 2012: 214). Writer and actor John Hodgman recalls how derisive many people were about Twitter when it first entered the public consciousness, however «The early detractors failed to note … that Twitter, while faddish, was not only a fad: it is a tool, one with almost as many unique uses as there are humans to take it up» (King 2014), in other words «Twitter offered a very restrictive set of protocols that awaken the imagination: what can I do with 140 characters that will be meaningful to others? The solution has proven to be pretty much endless» (*ibid.*).

For the short-story writer and novelist Thomas Beller such «built-in limitation corresponds to the sense of rhythm and proportion that writers apply to each line,» however he has no hesitation in recognising that there are «a set of major problems for writers on Twitter»

> Does a piece of writing that is never seen by anyone other than its author even exist? Does a thought need to be shared to exist? What happens to the stray thought that drifts into view, is pondered, and then drifts away? Perhaps you jot it down in a note before it vanishes, so that you can mull it over in the future. It's like a seed that, when you return to it, may have grown into something visible. Or perhaps you put it in a tweet, making the note public. But does the fact that it is public diminish the chances that it will grow into something sturdy and lasting? Does

articulating a thought in public freeze it in place somehow, making it not part of a thought process but rather a tiny little finished sculpture? Is tweeting the same as publishing? … Is tweeting talking it out before you write it, or part of a process? And what if writing a piece in tweets is considered publication? And if its appearance on Twitter equals being published, do I even have the rights to it anymore? (Beller 2013)

Before concluding:

> Technological innovations regarding writing—the typewriter, the electric typewriter, the computer and all its word-processing tools—have been about removing impediments to publishing one's words. But they all have, until now, stopped short of the actual act of publishing. The line between writing and talking has also been blurred, and we can imagine that the line between talking and thinking will be, too, at some point (*Ibid.*).

What transpires from Beller's penetrating analysis of the impact of Twitter on (professional) writers is, predictably, a certain anxiety at the "blurring of lines" between the public and the private, between what constitutes literary writing and talking, not to mention the question of ownership of what is published, and yet Beller's fine sensitivity allows him to acknowledge also that: «Writing on Twitter brings the energy of a début to every phrase. You could say it imbues writing with a sense of performance, though writing has always involved performance in the sense of performance anxiety» (*ibid.*).

Further on in the article Beller poses another key question: «could Twitter possibly be productive, beyond the basic act of publicizing what you have written and/or proving that you still exist?» (*ibid.*) There is no better way to answer than by «composing a short piece, something between a journal entry and a personal essay, in a series of tweets» (*ibid.*).

> I wanted to recount an experience but wasn't sure what I thought of it, and suddenly the idea of writing in public seemed

like it would force me toward a further understanding. I wrote it out at night, when I do most of my writing. Something about tweeting at that hour reminded me how it once felt to talk into my friend's C.B. radio —that strange precursor to the Internet and its "communities"—way back when. Except, in this case, I wasn't pretending to be a trucker. I was pretending to be me.

   I found the experience to be strange, exhilarating, outrageously narcissistic, frightening, and embarrassing. In other words, like writing. But also like acting, or playing a concert—something whose essence is bound up in the fact that it's being done live. You can't really see the auditorium and don't know the size of the audience. It's like throwing paper airplanes out a high window: someone may see their elegant dive, maybe a lot of people. The plane will be rushed onward and out of sight. Except there is now a record of it. I assumed my series of tweets was a draft. They were not pages crumpled on the floor, exactly—more like pages to be stacked up and put aside, where, like some gourmet dish, its elements might have time to blend. (*Ibid.*)

A few days later he assembled the tweets and sent them for publication, the essay "The Maserati Kid" (composed of what one assumes were "revised" tweets) was published in *The Paris Review* (Beller 2011).

Beller's experience is revealing of both the similarities, writing a tweet *feels* like writing after all, and the differences, tweeting is *live* writing. In spite of his enthusiasm for the medium, for Beller some lines are not to be blurred, the publication of his tweets in *The Paris Review* (which, ironically, is shareable across various social media platforms, including Twitter) confers the literature *imprimatur* to what was not the perfect "gourmet dish" that it could become, with *time*. The performance needs to be rehearsed (tweets as drafts) in order to achieve the required literary standard.

The issues raised by Beller seem to validate the situation of "aesthetic chaos" mentioned above, while highlighting the need for further research in "Twitteracy", a set of literacy practices that are increasingly multi-modal (Greenhow - Gleason 2012) and in the

academic field of electronic/intermedia literature studies. Such research is needed in order to elucidate the evolving relationship between new forms of digital writing and established notions of literariness and the literary work. In this sense, Bryan Alexander's attempt at dividing Twitter storytelling into four modes is very useful (Alexander 2011). The first mode relates to the fact that «Twitter's immediacy lends itself to "live" stories», the second is the possibility for «single tweets to tell very short stories, … micronarratives», a third category draws upon the old genre of the aphorism, while the fourth mode «heightens the human while abstracting it out» (*ibid.*: 61-64). Alexander provides some examples to illustrate his four categories and I certainly commend his effort, however I wish to mention here the work of Masha Tupitsyn because it defies any categorizations, thus demonstrating the aesthetic challenges but also the enormous creative potential of digital writing. Tupitsyn is the author of *LACONIA: 1,200 Tweets on Film* (2011) the first book of film criticism written entirely on Twitter and *Love Dog* (2013) conceived as a multi-media blog and inspired by Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* and *Mourning Diary*—a sort of art book, part love manifesto and part philosophical notebook[14].

Certainly not as experimental, but worthy of a reference is the "Twitter Fiction" series run by *The Guardian* from October 2012 to August 2013 which challenged a mix of top writers, journalist and the odd celebrity (Katie Price) to write a story with only 140 characters to play with[15].

In 2012 the "Twitter Fiction Festival" took place, it was an interesting experiment which combined a selection of stories to be showcased and, crucially, the possibility for readers to contribute (Fitzgerald 2012). Of all the stories selected the mystery one by Elliott

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[14] Tagged #ld100 "quotes" from Love Dog are available at http://www.berfrois.com/2013/07/joanna-walsh-100-tweets-about-love-dog/

[15] http://www.theguardian.com/books/series/twitter-fiction

Holt[16] was particularly successful in that, as the *Slate* writer Katy Waldman put it:

> Holt embraces Twitter for what it is, rather than trying to bend it into some tool that it isn't. With its simultaneous narrators and fractured storyline, this is not the kind of tale that could march steadily across a continuous expanse of white space. It's actually made for the medium. (Waldman 2012)

Also, in a final twist, Holt asked readers to tweet their choice among #accident, #homicide, or #suicide, as to the cause of death of the mysterious character "Miranda Brown, 44, of Brooklyn" (*ibid*.).

Another intriguing example of Twitter storytelling, vaguely reminiscent of the A *Million Penguins* project discussed above is *A Ball at Pemberley*, described as "a new experiment in creative Twitter collaboration." As we read in the project's page «*A Ball at Pemberley* came into being after Adam Spunberg and famed author Lynn Shepherd conceived of an idea: What if Jane Austen lovers from around the world could tweet a Jane Austen sequel in turns?» As a result «tens of people from six continents would go on to write a 100,000-word novel!» (http://austenproject.com/about/).

What is worth considering, once again, is how the notion of authorship, traditionally tied to the production of a single authored work of static text is evolving into forms of *authorial collaboration*.[17] As for publishing, it has metamorphosed into a ubiquitous activity making thus possible for multiple authors to publish their personal (re)interpretation of the world they live in. This is exactly the case of *Hi*, a new storytelling platform created by writer and designer Craig Mod. The concept involves participants in various parts of the world

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[16] Storified at https://storify.com/penguinpress/elliotholt-s-twitterfiction-story

[17] Among the examples of collaborative authorship on Facebook see "Finish the Story" initiated in 2013 by the literary-intellectual online maga-zine *Berfrois* https://www.facebook.com/berfrois/posts/533685700007618

"mapping" their surroundings with their experiences, all thanks to their mobile devices. The goal of *Hi* is:

> To *narrative map the world*. To achieve that goal, we've developed, and continue to iterate on, an editorial workflow we think is well suited to networked storytelling. To connecting narrative with place. To building habit. To making a purposeful mess, because the creative process is messy, and our platforms should be okay with that. (Mod 2013)

Predicting the future of storytelling (and of books) is something of a fool's errand, and yet speculating about it is hard to resist. Perhaps the boundary between our minds and our technologies will become so blurred that we turn into "neurofiction readers" (http://neurofiction.net/), or maybe not human writers but "Literature generators" will provide us with all the stories we need (http://www.narrabase.net/poetry_generators.html). Novelist James Warner has come up with a vaguely dystopic chronology which is both smart and humorous:

> 2020: All Books Will Be Cross-Platform and Interactive
>
> 2030: All Books Will Be Crowdsourced and Cloud-Based
>
> 2040: Authors Will Become Like Tamagotchi
>
> 2050: Analog Reading Will Be Digitally Simulated
>
> 2060: Physical Books Will Make a Comeback in Annoying Contexts
> 2070: We Will All Become Cyborgs (Warner 2011)

The climax is reached in 2080 when:

> Aroma-bibliography will triumph, as vast epics are composed for newly developed scent receptors, transforming the rising seas into a giant bath of community-assisted transmedia content. Also

around this time, the oral literature of dolphins will be deciphered and will turn out, inexplicably, to be all about vampires. (*Ibid*.)

I find it oddly reassuring that in Warner's semi-serious lucubrations the transmedia literature of the future might have a Gothic tinge ("all about vampires") since the Gothic, from its inception in the Enlightenment period, has ushered us into depths of inner experiences better than any other, more decorous form of storytelling, could successfully achieve. Perhaps the "vast epics" of the future will narrate the deeds of a long gone human race, one that found pleasure in terror and consolation in the technological sublime, a race united by the collective, emotional experience of storytelling.

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The paper

How to quote this paper

Anna, Notaro, "How Networked Communication has changed the ways we tell stories", *Technology, Imagination, Narrative Forms*, Ed. L. Esposito, E. Piga, A. Ruggiero, Between, IV.8 (2014), http://www.betweenjournal.it/