

The Poetics of Interactive Digital Novel: Between Presence and Reception

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Abstract:

There is no doubt that technology has imposed its logic, expanded its influence, and tightened its grip on our lives. It is no longer separate from our possessions, and literature is one of the fields that the digital world has invaded, leaving clear marks that have prompted critics and researchers to reconsider many concepts and terms related to literary theory as a whole. This trend has become an undeniable reality.

Electronic media has replaced print media, and these media possess advanced technologies that creative writers have employed in many of their works. Cyberspace has facilitated the reception and documentation of a wide range of creative works, as well as attracting a vast audience that has flocked to it, captivated and enthusiastic about this new world. This space has opened up vast horizons for them, not only to receive these literary texts, but also to actively participate in them—that is, to become creators themselves.

Keywords: Poetics, Digital Novel, Interactive, Presence, Reception

INTRODUCTION

In our current era, technological breakthroughs have brought about qualitative transformations in various aspects of human life, shrinking distances and facilitating interaction and communication between peoples, societies, and nations. Thanks to its widespread adoption, technology has become an integral part of our daily lives, profoundly impacting health, education, agriculture, and public services—all essential elements for ensuring human well-being and comfort. The power of technology facilitates human communication across the globe, as well as the exchange of ideas, innovations, and resources. The effects of technological progress extend beyond this, encompassing the realms of thought, creativity, arts, and literature. Throughout history, numerous technological achievements have significantly influenced the world of creativity and literature. The invention of printing played a pivotal role in the dissemination and spread of literature, and with the technological and information revolution, we have transitioned from printed to digital literature, leading to the emergence of new modes of production and reception.

Literature has always been a reflection of society and human experiences. The interaction between literature and technology has paved the way for the emergence of new literary forms that have sought to establish themselves in this vast digital space, attracting a wide audience captivated by this creative approach. This style has become known by many names, including

digital literature, interactive literature, and electronic literature. Some literary forms have also been termed digital styles, such as digital short stories, digital poetry, and digital novels.

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Initially, the concept of digital literature will be addressed, which forms the essential basis of the subject of study.

The concept of Electronic Literature:

In light of the new contexts imposed by the technological age, which have added a crucial element to literary creativity—namely, the digital world and specifically the computer with its technical and aesthetic capabilities that contribute to shaping literary works—many concepts related to literary theory, including digital or electronic literature, have been reconsidered. Therefore, we will attempt to define this term without delving into the ongoing debate surrounding the terminological differences that have emerged in critical and literary circles, as this is not our primary objective in this study.

We will focus on some of the definitions proposed by early researchers who studied this type of literary creativity, which, in its initial stages, required a precise definition and conceptualization. Among these definitions is that of Fatima Al-Buraiki:

"It is a form of literature that utilizes modern technology to create a new genre, blending literature and technology, accessible only through electronic media, i.e., via the screen. Furthermore, this literature can only be interactive if it grants the reader an equal or greater space than the author allocated to the original text".¹

Philippe Bootz defined it as follows: We call 'digital literature' any narrative or poetic form that uses an information device as a medium and uses one or more of the characteristics of that medium.²

Jamil Hamdawi defined it as follows: "Digital literature refers to narrative, poetic, or dramatic literature that uses media in writing and creation, meaning that it uses a computer or other electronic media to write a text or creative work."³

From these preceding definitions, it becomes clear that there is a near consensus that digital literature employs and invests in contemporary technological innovations within the creative process. Thus, it can be said that it has created an essential partner, in addition to the

¹ Fatima Al-Breiki. Introduction to Interactive Literature. Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Morocco, 2006, P49.

² Philippe Bootz, what is digital literature? Tra; Mohammed Aslim, *Alamat Revue culturelle*, Morocco, N° 35, 2011, p102.

³ Jamil Hamdaoui, *Digital Literature: Between Theory and Practice*, Alukah, 2016, P15.

creator, the text, and the reader. Previously, we did not recognize or consider any other elements besides these three, nor did we find alternatives. The transformations we have recently witnessed have imposed their logic upon us and have rapidly permeated our lives to such an extent that we have become heavily reliant upon them in various aspects. Thanks to the capabilities and services they provide, this type of literature, now forging its path in this remarkable space, has emerged, shining with a new and attractive appearance. It offers us new methods of production and reception, representing a new stage in our creative lives. Perhaps this embodies the era of modernity and postmodernity, which has led to a change in many perceptions and concepts in the fields of literature and the arts and has added new means and tools that have become essential in the creative process.

One of the most prominent features of this literature is its interactive nature, which unites the two poles of the literary work: the writer and the reader. It focuses on the interaction between the recipient and the text at the levels of browsing, reception, and acceptance. This relationship is governed by a set of fundamental interactive elements: text, sound, image, movement, the reader, and the computer, with an emphasis on both internal interactive relationships (the relationship between textual links) and external interactive relationships (the connection between the creator and the reader).

In other words, interactive literature combines the activity of the writer or narrator with the activity of the reader.⁴ Saïd Yaktine emphasizes the linguistic element as the foundation of true digital literature. Literature must rely on a language that contains the element of creativity to ensure its continuity and existence within the literary arts to which it belongs so that it does not become severed from those connections that always bind it to them. As for true digital literature—that is, that which deserves to be called a digital work—in my opinion, it is a creative work that depends first and foremost on language as the basis of aesthetic expression. Consequently, it joins the entirety of the literary discourses within which it operates, of course, in addition to the multiplicity of signs and textual cohesion,⁵ as he indicated in his discussion.

Digital Novel

Previously, we received narratives through printed materials, but technological advancements have provided us with new technologies and media. The screen has become the preferred alternative medium for creative expression, and we have begun to receive narratives through it, prompting us to change and develop many concepts in response to these new possibilities. The convergence of literature and information technology has led to the birth of a novel based on the external interaction between different forms of human culture and the internal interaction that occurs between interconnected networks of texts.⁶

Fatima Al-Buraiki defines digital Novel as a genre of narrative art in which the writer employs the characteristics of hypertext, allowing for the connection between texts and media,

⁴ Ibid, P14.

⁵ Saïd Yaktine, Op. cit. P190.

⁶ labiba khammar. The poetics of interactive text. roueya for Publishing and Distribution. Cairo. 2014.P8.

whether written text; still or moving images; live or musical sounds; animated graphics; maps; illustrations; tables; or others. This connection is made through electronic links, highlighted in blue, that guide the reader to what can be considered footnotes to the main text, offering explanations or additional information to deepen understanding.

Digital Novel relies on the tangible and visible; it sees movement and colours and hears various sounds, including music. Writing, once the sole focus, now finds partners, and the novel depends on the interaction between its elements as its foundation. Linguistic and non-linguistic elements combine to produce the text, and this is achieved through links. These links begin as mere media within the services offered by modern technology to every user, but they become a functional component for the literary text, as they construct the text's structure and thus determine its form and how it is read. The text is transformed into something different from the text the creator intended, which is why writers adopt this approach. This new component becomes integral to the creative process, and writers adapt their work to this new direction, which requires extensive knowledge and experience in the digital world, given its numerous advantages and capabilities, all achieved in record time.⁷

Digital Novel relies on the tangible and the visual; it experiences movement and coolers and hears diverse sounds, such as music. This means that writing, once the sole focus, has found partners. Today's fiction depends on the interaction between its elements as its foundation, where linguistic and nonlinguistic components combine to produce the text. This interaction occurs through links, which begin as simple media within the services provided by modern technology to every user. These links become a functional element of the literary text, shaping its structure and thus determining its form and how it is read. The text transforms into a form different from what the author intended. What motivates writers to adopt this approach is that the new element becomes an integral part of the creative process.⁸ Therefore, they adapt their work to this new direction, which requires extensive knowledge and experience in the digital world, given its advantages and immense capabilities in record time.

Digital literature represents a new experience with an innovative perspective, opening up promising horizons and vast, boundless worlds, free from the constraints of time and place. With this new medium, we embark on novel narrative experiences, born from the use of modern technology and distinct from what was previously prevalent. Consequently, this experience surpasses everything that came before it since the late 1960s and early 1970s. This necessitates a new awareness of writing and a different vision of text and narrative, which, with digitization, have acquired new characteristics that differ radically from previous practices.⁹

From this perspective, the method of producing texts differs fundamentally from its predecessors. Undoubtedly, using the screen as a means of accessing texts cultivates a new sensitivity, reflecting the broad and rapid transformation in our lives across its various literary,

⁷ Fatima Al-Breiki, Op. cit. P112.

⁸ Zohour Karam, Digital Literature `Cultural Questions and Conceptual Reflections, roueya for Publishing and Distribution, 2009, ed 1, 2009, P35.

⁹ Said Yaqtin, Issues of the New Arabic Novel: Existence and Boundaries

artistic, intellectual, social, and other aspects. Such an evolution prompts us to pose new questions, particularly in the field of literary theory, through which we define our relationship with a world that has arrived laden with unprecedented innovations.

This profound impact will undoubtedly manifest itself through diverse forms of expression and various methods of production and presentation. Interactive digital fiction is among the art forms most responsive to this new era, given its close connection to life in all its complexities and circumstances, its vast horizons in a boundless virtual world where imagination runs free, and its capacity for representation and understanding. Consequently, it has been said that our current era is the age of the novel par excellence.

Mohammed Najib Al-Talawi argues that "the emergence of a new aesthetic sensibility was a natural consequence of the modernist and postmodernist transformations witnessed by the fourth wave of civilization and the rapid changes that preceded it. It was also natural for this new aesthetic sensibility to be reflected in the verbal and visual arts across various literary genres, with the narrative novel being the first to develop, structurally and artistically embodying this aesthetic sensibility until it reached the level of technical literary creations and electronic literature and the transition from printed to digital narrative." He also believes that the digital novel was the first to attempt to keep pace with the digital transformation and benefit from its data and services, and it has made remarkable strides in the West, progressing rapidly. In contrast, the Arabic digital novel is still in its experimental stage. In general, it can be said that the shift from the printed novel to the digital novel is, in fact, a natural response to the social, economic, scientific, and technological transformations that the contemporary world is witnessing.

In this context, Muhammad Najib al-Talawi argues that modernist and postmodernist transformations have led to the formation of a new aesthetic sensibility, manifested in various verbal and visual arts, including literary genres. Among these literary genres, the novel has embodied this aesthetic shift in a structural and artistic manner, resulting in its transition from printed narrative to digital narrative in response to the distinctive characteristics of the new medium.¹⁰

The digital novel was the first attempt to embrace the digital transformation and leverage its data and services. It has made remarkable progress in the West, developing at a rapid pace, unlike the Arabic novel, which remains in its experimental phase. However, the digital transformation is, in reality, a natural response to the social, economic, scientific, and technological changes that the contemporary world has witnessed, with all their diversity in scope and nature.

The changes that have occurred in the novel have led to a reformulation of the concept of the literary text. As a result of this process, the text has acquired new features and characteristics that did not previously exist, such as intertextuality, openness of the text, and decentralization—features that a number of critics had pointed out before the digital transformation.

¹⁰ Muhammad Najib Al-Talawi Digital narratives. Al Jasrah Cultural. N56, 2020, P 56.

It is clear, then, that postmodern thinkers (Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and others) possessed a profound understanding of the digital text, recognizing its immense potential thanks to its vast openness; the difficulty of fully grasping its artistic dimensions and intellectual and epistemological boundaries; its ambiguity and nature; and its susceptibility to multiple free readings, leading to a multiplicity of interpretations and understandings. In this regard, Roland Barthes states: "In the ideal text, there are numerous networks interacting with one another, without any one of them dominating the others. It is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signified. The text has no true beginning; it is reversible and can be accessed from different points of entry without any one point of entry coming at the expense of another essential one... Systems of meaning can accommodate this absolute text in its multiplicity, but its multiplicity is infinite."¹¹

Roland Barthes' concept of text largely agrees with the definition of digital text, which overlaps, intersects, and interacts with other texts to produce a new imaginary text that expresses a new vision of the universe and the world and carries open dimensions that know no limits or restrictions.

In addition, **Said Yaqtin** points out that every text interacts with other texts and even becomes an intertextual text. The circle of the text has expanded with the crystallization of semiotics to include non-linguistic relations, so the text has an audible and visual aspect, and thus the text no longer interacts only with oral or written texts but with texts from other non-linguistic sign systems... Thus, the text has become infinite and multiple from different semantic, reading and sign angles."¹²

Based on the foregoing, written text has undergone a transformation from its printed form, which relies on paper as a traditional medium with its inherent characteristics, to hypertext, which uses computers as a means of display, benefiting from the data and technical services that contribute to its production and reception. Due to its complex nature, digital text does not adhere to a single methodology, making a complete understanding of its meanings and connotations impossible. Consequently, its meanings are characterized by openness and multiplicity within an unlimited semantic space.

The novel was the most suitable response to these transformations; however, the new digital novel does not negate the printed novel. The connection between them remains strong and enduring, but new circumstances and developments have imposed themselves and their logic on the printed novel, leading to its decline and paving the way for the digital novel. What applies to the novel also applies to other literary genres; they are not subject to pressures or exclusionary measures that would distance them from this model.

The evolution of literary genres does not imply the demise of any genre or the complete disappearance of any form of expression. Rather, it signifies its integration into subsequent genres and its continuation in expressive forms, whether as a textual backdrop or through a new relationship with the evolving structure. This perpetuates its existence as a memory of

¹¹S/Z, Roland Barthes, translated by Muhammad bin Al-Rafah Al-Bakri, Dar Kitab Al-Jadeed Al-Muttahida, 2016, pp. 37-38

¹² Said Yaqtin, *From Text to Intertextuality*, Alam Al-Fikr, Kuwait, 2003, p. 78.

writing, text, and expression.¹³ This assertion does not negate the origins of this art form or any other artistic form, whether as a tool or a structure, nor does it negate its references. Change is nothing but response, interaction, integration, and extension, not exclusion or displacement. It represents possibilities and techniques that have found their place within the structure of the artwork, granting it new atmospheres and spaces. This aligns with the perceptions and visions emerging from this technological development, enabling the creator and the artist to embark on a unique experience and unleash their creative imagination to roam freely in this boundless virtual space.

These new technologies have fundamentally transformed the linear flow of narrative. Digital text today relies on a wide range of media, encompassing not only language but also sound, images, software, and more. This has led to the emergence of a new and innovative virtual text that utilizes hypertext technology, allowing for free movement and exploration within the text. This is achieved through what are known as links. This horizontal expansion has led to a decline in the centrality of the narrative, a development that aligns with the activation of link dynamics in the online digital novel space.

The dynamic nature of connections and the freedom of interaction have become an alternative to the traditional plot structure of the printed novel.¹⁴ As a result, the author's role has diminished significantly, and the barriers between author and reader have disappeared. Whereas previously the author controlled and oversaw the narrative process from beginning to end, they no longer possess the same absolute authority over the text. Instead, they now have other active partners who contribute to its construction. The reader, for example, enjoys the freedom to explore the atmosphere of the text according to their desires and inclinations, thanks to the dynamic connections that constitute the text. This has led to the novel's departure from its previously dominant linear nature. Consequently, this has overshadowed what is known as the artistic plot, which was considered one of the most important artistic characteristics of the story, given its connection to the sequence of events and its artistic coherence, governed by the logic of causality, from beginning to climax, reaching the ending envisioned by the author. The interactive digital novel is a creative text with its own conditions, characteristics, and techniques, and it is produced within its own environment, both in terms of the production process and the reception process.

Digital novel reception

Interactive fiction found its new means, tools, and techniques under new circumstances, surpassing what was prevalent in the printed novel, whether in terms of its linearity, language, narrative structure, or time and place. The French New Novel paved the way for the emergence of interactive fiction by transcending the narrative structure of the traditional novel, with its dominant circular timeline, deconstruction of the plot, and transformation of the narrative from a linear to a branching form. Thus, the new novel became simply an intelligent story that

¹³ Zohour Karam, Op. cit. P25

¹⁴ Muhammad Najib Al-Talawi, Op. cit. P59

requires the unravelling of its mysteries; its rules and secrets are known, and it demands the active participation of a reader who does not remain a passive recipient.¹⁵

Therefore, digital fiction requires a reader who actively engages with the artwork, interacts with the text, participates in its construction, and allows their imagination to roam freely through its pages, thanks to the links that enable them to navigate a vast space within a wonderful and breathtaking virtual world, where narrative, sound, movement, color, and landscapes harmonies. The reader must be familiar with digital culture; these texts cannot be approached without a background that supports their understanding of the interactive atmosphere of digital writing.

In fact, the reader only gained prominence in the creative process with the emergence of theories that focused on them as a fundamental element. Early examples include Virginia Woolf's work on the average reader, studies that critically examined reader response, structuralist studies that focused on the act of reading (Todorov and Roland Barthes), and semiotic studies (Umberto Eco).¹⁶ The German Constance School developed reception theory, granting the reader greater freedom in interacting with fictional works, enabling them to become both participants and creators. In the Constance School, the efforts of the creator and the reader converge.¹⁷

The interactive nature of digital texts strengthens the relationship between writer and reader. Authors construct their texts using a series of links that allow readers to navigate freely. It is essential that these links include engaging elements that facilitate selective browsing, aligning with the reader's interests and preferences. Authors no longer possess absolute control over the text, nor do they write in isolation; rather, they share it with the reader, who reinterprets what they read. Therefore, reading the text in a logical sequence has become impossible because its hyperlinked nature offers the reader limitless possibilities for interpretation.

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¹⁵ Tzarfaoui Omar. *The blue writing: Introduction to interactive literature*. Al-Rafed Magazine, Department of Culture and Media, Sharjah Government, Issue: 52, 2013, pp. 195-196.

¹⁶ bushra musa saleh. *Reception theory*. Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, 2001, P 33.

¹⁷ Mohamed MRINI, *Digital text and cognitive transfer substitutions*. Al-Rafed Magazine, Department of Culture and Media, Sharjah Government, Issue: 89, 2015, pp. 104.

¹⁸ Mohamed MRINI, *Digital text and cognitive transfer substitutions*. Al-Rafed Magazine, Department of Culture and Media, Sharjah Government, Issue: 89, 2015, pp. 104.

Thus, digital text has become composed of multiple elements, where words, sound, images, and movement converge. Consequently, the types of reading have multiplied, encompassing word reading, image reading, movement reading, and so on. Moreover, the reader is no longer preoccupied with the principle of intentionality or the pursuit of the author's intended meaning. Rather, they imbue the text with new meanings that align with their worldview, their understanding of the universe, and their unique approach to creativity and art. Therefore, we find the text laden with countless interpretations, depending on each reader. From this perspective, the very concept of reading will change, becoming defined as the process of assigning meaning to a text, akin to a new style of writing that carries innovative meanings resulting from the reader's experience in the interactive digital space.¹⁹ The text is no longer bound by the ending hinted at by the author but rather depends on the path the reader takes during their interaction with it and on the background from which they begin. Thus, the number of possible endings multiplies with each reading.

The text offers the reader immense possibilities for interaction and participation, reinforcing the principle of interaction we highlighted earlier and demonstrating that the reader's role is no less important than the writer's.²⁰ Text formation is no longer the sole domain of the author, who previously enjoyed exclusive control and ownership. The author writes, arranges events, chooses characters, and determines time and place. They also craft the ending, which they deem consistent with the logic of facts and events, while simultaneously reflecting their opinions and convictions. However, in the age of digital writing, the reader has become a competitor to the writer, transforming into an active participant with complete freedom to construct the text as they see fit and to approach it from any angle they choose, without restrictions or conditions. Thus, the text transforms from a linear to a non-linear form through a reception process that leverages modern and advanced technologies, making it more dynamic and effective. This is achieved only through hypertext technology and the use of symbols that transcend the purely linguistic realm, such as sound, movement, and other elements, depending on the specific technology employed.

Conclusion

The reader's growing role in interacting with digital narrative texts, including digital novels, places them in a highly challenging position. This leads to significant confusion regarding the beginnings and ends of literary works, given their overlap and interconnectedness. This blurs the lines between them, ultimately producing an ambiguous and unclear picture. In some texts, this leads to the marginalization or even disappearance of reading, not only because audiovisual expressions are replaced by dynamic interactions but also because the possibility of listening to the text instead of reading it becomes readily apparent and controllable according to the reader's preferences. Consequently, the term "reception" becomes more meaningful than "reading" in the interactive context, which does not limit the reader/recipient to linear reading but rather compels them to interact with the text, interpret it, and reconstruct its meanings.

¹⁹ Ibid. P19.

²⁰ Saïd Yaktine, Op. cit. P78

Interactive digital texts published on social media receive a vast number of users from diverse intellectual, scientific, social, and other backgrounds, resulting in numerous and varied interpretations. Social media allows users the freedom to navigate and explore open links and connections, thus removing the limitations that might hinder Arab readers who may lack the prior knowledge and technical expertise necessary to engage with this type of art. We must embrace this development on intellectual, scientific, and artistic levels so that it can practically reach its full potential, which is what we strive to achieve.

The digital space has facilitated the conditions and mechanisms of art, providing opportunities for numerous creators to showcase their artistic and narrative works. It has also opened vast horizons for readers to receive this art and participate in its shaping and creation, thanks to the freedom granted to them in interacting with these texts. Thus, it becomes clear that narrative creativity in this virtual space requires an addition or a touch that makes it open to multiple interpretations, thereby broadening its appeal. This desired form and image can only be achieved through the synergy between a creative narrative text and a conscious and appreciative reader utilizing this new medium, which has become an active element in the creative process. The future continues to promise new developments in life in general and in literature in particular.