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A Toolkit for Impossibilities

Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell's *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural*

Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell: *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural. Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2021. (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative) 218 pp. USD 79.95. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1456-5

Introduction: The Medium and the Message

Natural narratology, according to Monika Fludernik, works from the premise that narratives are defined by "the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience" (1996, 12). Unnatural narratology is a reaction to this idea, and it focuses on those elements of narratives that cannot be reconciled with the physical laws or logical tenets of the real world. While some unnatural narratologists are interested in text-intrinsic elements that cause alienation because of the impossibilities they present (Richardson 2006; 2015), other scholars focus on the dimension of reception and describe reading strategies for making sense of logical and physical impossibilities encountered in narratives (Alber 2016). The major focus of all branches of unnatural narratology so far has been on the print medium.

Digital Fiction and the Unnatural situates itself at the intersection of unnatural narratology and transmedial narratology, and it is the first systematic investigation of the use of unnatural elements in digital fiction. The authors of *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* examine a broad corpus of digital unnatural narratives that range from hypertext narratives to computer games in order to develop a toolkit for analyzing the unnatural in digital fiction – fiction of an interactive nature that is "written for and read on a computer screen [and] that pursues its verbal, discursive and / or conceptual complexity through the digital medium" (p. 2). *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* sets out from the basic yet crucial observation that many elements that are classically read as unnatural in literary print fiction have become conventionalized in digital fiction, and have therefore lost their alienating effect. Ensslin and Bell thus adopt Alber's idea of the unnatural as defined by logical and physical impossibilities, though not necessarily as alienating. They examine a range of unnatural narratives featuring both conventionalized and alienating impossibilities, but their central interest in this book lies in narratives "that deliberately play with and subvert conventions of storytelling

and narrative design" (p. 1). Over the course of their argument, they convincingly demonstrate that subverting conventions and creating alienating experiences for readers or players is not a matter of the devices used. Instead, the authors argue that what is perceived as alienating depends on the narrative medium.

The main focus of *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* lies in examining those unnatural aspects of digital fiction that are antimimetic (in the sense of alienating and non-conventionalized with regard to digital fiction, as proposed by Brian Richardson) rather than merely nonrealistic (as they can for example be found in fairy tales or fantasy narratives) (p. 6). Antimimetic elements, for example, frequently involve perceived transgressions of the boundary between the storyworld and the actual world. Ensslin and Bell develop concepts to describe medium-specific reading strategies that readers may employ to make sense of antimimetic elements in digital fiction. Specifically, Ensslin and Bell propose making two medium-specific additions to the typology of reading strategies described by Alber (2016).

Towards a Digital Concept of the Unnatural

The book develops its argument in five main chapters, each of which is dedicated to one distinctive feature of digital unnatural narratives. Chapter one investigates multilinearity and contradictions, chapter two examines metalepses that seem to transgress the boundary between storyworld and actual word, chapter 3 is dedicated to impossible representations of space and time in digital fiction, chapter 4 takes a closer look at phenomena connected to the aspect of voice, and chapter five discusses the use of the second person pronoun in digital fiction.

Chapter 1, "Multilinearity and Narrative Contradiction," addresses multilinearity as a feature of digital fiction that frequently produces plotlines with incompatible content. Affording readers or players access to multiple plot structures draws attention to the logical impossibility of mutually exclusive events occurring within the same storyworld. The chapter takes a look at how narrative contradictions that result from multilinear plot structures can (or refuse to) be rationalized by readers. Ensslin and Bell first establish that the way in which digital fiction draws attention to contradictions has a medium-specific component: the involvement of the reader. Digital fiction's interactive nature allows for the reader to become a co-constructor of the story – such as in actively selecting their path through a hypertext narrative. Explicit references to the convention of readers selecting a storyline constitute a self-reflexive element that draws attention to the potential impossibilities and incompatibilities that can be produced by involving readers or players in determining the plot. Self-reflexive references to conventions that involve the recipients' actions with regard to the text are consequently a manifestation of the unnatural that is specific to digital media.

The medium-specific contradictions a narrative produces through its form of presentation operate in close association with medium-specific reading strategies (readers may opt to go back and choose a different path through a hypertext narrative that produces a plot incompatible with the first route). Ensslin and Bell argue that recipients make sense of contradictions in relation to the medium in which these occur. (Experienced) recipients of hypertext fiction, for example, may recognize logical contradictions as a conventionalized element of this form of narration, and accept the contradiction as a given rather than attempt to synthesize various incompatible storylines. Textual phenomena (such as multilinear and contradictory plotlines), Ensslin and Bell argue, can thus appear unnatural in varying measures depending on the medium in which they are encountered, and may consequentially trigger different reading strategies. In order to describe this phenomenon, Ensslin and Bell introduce the term "medium-specific antimimeticism" (p. 15).

The second chapter investigates the phenomenon of "Interactional Metalepsis", "a form of metalepsis that takes place across the actual-world-to-storyworld boundary" (p. 50). In digital media, the illusion that bidirectional interaction is possible between actual-world players and storyworld elements is achieved by medium- or hardware-specific properties (such as the use of an avatar in games). Ensslin and Bell work from the assumption that metalepses in print media are almost always alienating, and argue that this is not the case for digital media, since the interactive nature of the latter automatically implies a degree of permeability between the players' actual world and the storyworld represented. This permeability, Ensslin and Bell argue, usually enhances the degree of the players' immersion in the storyworld. Since the players' representation in a storyworld through an avatar is conventionalized to a high degree, the logical impossibility of a player being simultaneously part of the actual world and of the storyworld is thus to be considered unnatural, but not necessarily antimimetic.

Ensslin and Bell then discuss several subtypes of interactional metalepsis in digital fiction that, to varying degrees, have the potential to be illusion-breaking rather than immersion-enhancing, despite the high degree to which the phenomenon of metalepsis is conventionalized in this medium. This can be the case with subtypes of metalepses that are not possible in other media because they depend on the hardware and software of the digital medium for their effect. An example of this would be when the metaleptic element concerns an aspect of the storyworld other than characters or narrators – such as the interface as a means of navigating the storyworld. Ensslin and Bell cite the game *The Breathing Wall* (2004) by Kate Pullinger, Stefan Schemat, and Babel, as an example where the players' access to the storyworld is defamiliarized because the game does not make use of conventionalized game mechanics. Rather than using the conventional way of metaleptically interacting with the storyworld through a controller or keyboard, players of *The Breathing Wall* need to regulate the pace of their breathing – recorded through the microphone of a headset – to navigate the storyworld (p. 64). This unusual and non-conventionalized means of navigation draws attention to the fact that the interaction between player and storyworld is

always metaleptic in nature, and this particular interface can be considered anti-mimetic in that it requires the players' awareness of their own body's presence outside the storyworld.

Ensslin and Bell argue that unnatural effects such as the one produced by *The Breathing Wall*, where it is the form of navigation rather than an aspect of the storyworld that is responsible for the defamiliarizing experience, should be examined in the context of the medium that produces them. Based on Alber's idea of a "Zen" strategy of reading (2016), in which readers accept physical and logical impossibilities as a given rather than trying to resolve impossibilities through interpretation, Ensslin and Bell propose the label "accepted as unnatural construction" to describe a reading strategy where players come to term with alienating playing experiences caused by formal features by accepting them as a (medium-specific) given (p. 33f).

Ensslin and Bell convincingly argue that, in digital fiction, metalepsis is not a phenomenon restricted to characters or narrators, but that a game's technological interface or formal elements may also be employed to create metalepses. Furthermore, digital fiction may rely on augmented reality to blend inanimate storyworld entities such as buildings or general features of landscape with the players' actual world (p. 81) – as is the case in the augmented-reality fitness game *Zombies, Run!* Ensslin and Bell point out that classical explanatory models for metalepsis are based around (the transgression of) diegetic levels (e.g. Genette 1980), implicitly suggesting that metalepsis is restricted to narrating agents such as characters or narrators. Ensslin and Bell propose a revision of such explanatory models for digital fiction through a focus on worlds rather than diegetic levels.

The volume's third major area of investigation is "Impossible Space and Time" in digital fiction, and the ways in which players functionalize and naturalize those impossibilities. Ensslin and Bell work from the premise that in digital games, space takes a more central role than in other narrative media because the spatial mechanics of any game need to be internalized by players to make interaction with the storyworld possible. Logically or physically impossible space mechanics such as teleportation or impossibly high jumps are frequently highly conventionalized features of games that can be internalized quickly even by inexperienced players, because those mechanics are prerequisites for interactive navigation of the storyworld. Unnatural spaces in games are thereby more easily conventionalized than in other media.

Unnatural spaces in digital games, conversely, can be rendered alienating if a digital game breaks with medium-specific conventions which have been internalized by players. One reading strategy that players can employ to come to terms with unnatural game elements of this kind is to reflect on internalized ludic conventions. Such "metamedial" (p. 101) readings take into account the degree to which gameplay elements are conventionalized in order to explain their unnatural effect, and they may invoke other reading strategies (such as a thematic reading) to make sense of such breaks with convention. A game that unexpectedly restricts the players' range or pace of movement, for example may be read metamedially and thematically as a comment on (the illusion of) agency in video

games. The metamedial reading strategy is the author's second addition to Alber's typology.

Besides space, a second dimension of digital fiction that offers itself to medium-specific manipulations is time. Ensslin and Bell discuss existing concepts of unnatural temporality such as retrogressive temporality, time loops, or contradictory multilinearity, and they introduce two concepts to describe uses of unnatural time specific to digital fiction: multivariant chronology and cybertextual velocity.

Multivariant chronology is a type of unnatural temporality that often occurs together with multilinearity and narrative contradiction. Multivariant chronology may, for example, suggest the coexistence of different and mutually exclusive possible chronological sequences, character constellations, or, in the case of the detective genre, culprits (p. 119). Cybertextual velocity refers to instances in which "antimimetic uses of discourse time [...] affect readers' perception of story time" in digital fiction (p. 114), for instance when the programming determines the pace at which a scene has to be read or played, as is the case when countdown timers are used. Ensslin and Bell argue that unnatural temporalities frequently co-occur with logically or physically impossible representations of space.

Chapter four adapts Brian Richardson's concept of extreme narration for digital fiction in order to explore antimimetic narrative voices. According to Richardson, extreme narration occurs when "one narration is collapsed into another" (2006, 12), that is, when a narrative voice becomes incompatible with conventional ideas of stable worlds and identities (such as the idea that two individual minds cannot merge). Extreme narration thus stresses instability. This focus on instability informs Ensslin and Bell's exploration of deviant minds, more particularly of medium-specific instances of extreme unreliable narration that break the illusion that the player is interacting with a stable and coherent storyworld. A narrator's extreme unreliability may, for example, manifest in multilinear and mutually exclusive plotlines.

The chapter also discusses the concept of the interlocutor (see Richardson 2006, Ensslin 2018), which refers to a conventionalized way of addressing the narratee in digital fiction. An interlocutor addressing a player is markedly different from a narrator addressing the reader in literary fiction because it allows for an (interactionally metaleptic) dialogue between the player and either characters within the diegesis or extradiegetic voices, for instance when a player is asked whether they would like to equip a certain item. Although such a dialogue is a conventionalized element of digital fiction, it can be used to draw attention to the logical impossibility of bidirectional communication across diegetic levels, and can thus break immersion in a defamiliarizing way. As a case in point, such a scenario occurs when utterances that are initially ascribed to a character within the diegesis shift abruptly into metalevel commentary that questions the players' rather than the avatars' motivations.

The final analytical chapter, "It's all about 'You'", combines findings from chapters two and four to discuss how the use of the second person pronoun in digital fiction can evoke the impression of "ontological transgression" (p. 151),

that is, of dissolving the boundary between the players' actual world and the storyworld. Particular attention is paid to the referential ambiguity of the second person pronoun – when a doubly deictic 'you' is employed in a defamiliarizing way – and to the use of 'you' as a metaleptic strategy to draw attention to the impossibility of communicating across different ontological levels.

The latter is, for example, the case when 'you' is used by an extradiegetic narrator to communicate impossible knowledge to a character in the storyworld or to the player, as occurs when the narrator tells characters or the players' avatars what they are currently thinking. This type of omniscience is different from equally unnatural but firmly conventionalized forms of third person omniscience, because here the recipient of the message is a character within the diegesis rather than the narrative's addressee, and the narrator's communication is therefore metaleptic. Both the use of the second person pronoun and the impossibility of one entity knowing what another is currently thinking draw the players' attention to the impossibility of the communicative situation.

One use of 'you' that features quite routinely in digital games is that of a narrator employing an apostrophic 'you' that instructs players on how to navigate the storyworld, for example, and thus refers to a player and their avatar simultaneously. Ensslin and Bell argue that the use of a doubly deictic 'you' is likely to produce an antimimetic effect when it occurs in a way that goes beyond conventionalized navigational instructions and comments on the players' achievements. The doubly deictic 'you' is, among others, represented in the example of its use to draw attention to how the players', rather than their avatars' (moral) choices affect entities within the storyworld. The players' metaleptic interaction with the software can create the illusion of a collapse of the actual and the fictional world that may suggest the players' complicity in committing immoral acts.

Conclusion

Both authors have a long track record of publications in the field of digital literature, and the volume at hand combines insights from their various areas of expertise under the header of unnatural narratology. The book offers a toolkit for identifying and analyzing physical and logical impossibilities in experimental digital fiction that takes into account the particularities of digital media – in particular their interactive nature. By testing ideas proposed by unnatural narratologists against an entirely new corpus of narratives, Ensslin and Bell clearly demonstrate that the unnatural is a relative category, the defamiliarizing potential of which is subject to change not only across time but also across media. *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* proposes new concepts and reading strategies that will be of particular interest to scholars in the fields of transmedial narratology and

unnatural narratology, while also offering new insights and material to those interested in expanding their narratological toolkit or to readers with an interest in experimental narratives.

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