The Shape of Things to Come

An Interview with Marco Caracciolo

DIEGESIS: What is narrative research for you?

Caracciolo: Broadly speaking, I see it as the study of how the forms of narrative – that is, the way in which narratives are told, not just their subject matter – contribute to cultural meaning making. This is an intensely interdisciplinary project, which necessarily involves a broad range of media, narrative practices, and methodologies. But it is true that the reality of narrative research has often fallen short of that ideal, mostly by building on a more limited corpus (e.g., literary narratives) and by sticking to methods of literary analysis. There is, to be clear, nothing wrong with that (I am a literary scholar myself!), and I certainly don't want to undersell the value of literary analysis and interpretation. But there is also a lot of room to grow through interdisciplinary collaboration.

DIEGESIS: How would you describe your current research project to a wider audience?

Caracciolo: I'm interested in how narrative across various media (but particularly in fiction and video games) can explore what I call the dark side of complexity – the way in which complex situations can prove overwhelming or paralyzing for characters who experience them. It is a bit of a cliché to say that our world is becoming more and more complex, with material systems (think about digital technologies, the supply chain, or the global flows of labor and capital) interacting in ways that most of us don't fully understand. The effects of climate change are another example of runaway complexity, with possibly devastating consequences. My project explores how narrative can imagine (and perhaps helps us cope with) the breakdowns of daily life and experience when those systems stop functioning as expected.

DIEGESIS: Imagine you were to present your project in a brief social media post (max. 280 characters) – what would this post look like?

Caracciolo: From supply chains to the internet, we rely every day on technological and material networks that we don't fully understand. What happens when those systems break down? My project explores fictional works that imagine the psychological consequences of loss of systemic control.

DIEGESIS: What are the most innovative aspects of your current project?

Caracciolo: There is plenty of excellent work on narrative complexity (see, for instance, John Pier's discussion and the collections edited by Richard Walsh and Susan Stepney, as well as Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki), but this work tends to place an emphasis on two issues: the question whether narrative can adequately capture complex systems and the formal complexity of certain narratives (and their reception). My project has a more psychological focus, in line with my past work: how can narrative stage the experience of real-world complex systems getting out of hand?

DIEGESIS: In an ideal world, what could your project hope to achieve?

Caracciolo: Ideally, it would show how stories can help us come to terms imaginatively with some of the most pressing present-day challenges, which are largely a result of complexity. I'm also interested in studying how exposure to fictions dealing with complex systems could help shape the public perception of certain issues (including for instance climate change and migration). That's an empirical project that I wouldn't be able to pull off on my own, but I am always open to collaboration.

DIEGESIS: What is your vision of the future of narrative research?

Caracciolo: Picking up where my previous answer left off – I think the future of narrative research is inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary. But the type of interdisciplinarity I have in mind involves two-way dialogue rather than the uncritical adoption of scientific methods and practices. I am a strong supporter of empirical approaches to narrative (see my contribution to a 2016 special issue of this journal!), but it's important to practice empiricism respectfully, in dialogue with literary interpretation and experience and not in opposition to them. The future of narrative research is bright if it can expand in that empirical direction while avoiding the dangers of reductionism and instrumentalism.

Marco Caracciolo is Associate Professor of English at Ghent University in Belgium. Drawing inspiration from cognitive science, the philosophy of mind, and the environmental humanities, his work explores the forms of experience afforded by narrative in literary fiction and other media (especially video games). He is the author of several books, including most recently *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality* (De Gruyter, 2023) and *On Soulsring Worlds: Narrative Complexity, Digital Communities, and Interpretation in* Dark Souls *and* Elden Ring (Routledge, 2024).

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