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Beyond Text-Orientation

Three Potential Directions of Development for Digital Narrative Journalism

The article discusses narrative journalism in digital environments with the help of three attributes: text-orientation, linearity, and immersion. Media companies have been rather slow in taking advantage of the potentials of the Internet. In the last years the development has been faster, and there is a wide range of digital narrative journalism from print-alike text-oriented stories to nonlinear experiments. However, the challenges of monetization set restrictions to creativity, as publishers have to choose between for instance creating an immersive entity and meeting the needs of advertisers.

In 2014, I was curious to know what happens when narrative longform journalism is taken into digital environment. I wrote an essay including a small survey on six journalistic entrepreneurs in Europe and the U.S. Their responses suggested that they valued the viral features of online publishing over enhancing the reading experience with different media elements, such as audio or video.¹

By focusing on representatives of the genre of narrative longform journalism, I chose to rule out less text-oriented examples. That was a natural choice for me, a researcher with a background in the study of literary journalism, the scholarship of which has mostly focused on print format.² In this essay I pick up from where I left off two years ago, and take a somewhat wider look at digital storytelling in journalism, sorting it out with three attributes: text-orientation, linearity, and immersion.

Background of digital narrative journalism

At the dawn of Internet journalism it was widely believed that the stories written to the World

Wide Web had to be brief. However, from the early days on, there were also publishers who dared to upload long stories to the Internet, such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.³ The possibilities in digital journalism increased significantly when tablet computers were introduced, beginning with Apple's iPad in 2010. *The Atavist*, started in 2011, was a leading "publishing boutique" optimized for the iPad. Its sophisticated native app created a "cognitive container", which increased the immersive effect of the stories.⁴ However, in September 2015 *The Atavist* abandoned their native app and focused on the universal format of HTML5.

Statistics show that the sales of tablet computers have been on the decline for some time now.⁵ Time will tell whether tablets will disappear altogether, but their impact on the development of digital narrative journalism has in any case been remarkable. Another point in time worth mentioning is December 2012, when *The New York Times* published their massive piece "Snow Fall – The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek". It set a standard for digital journalism, even though it has divided opinions among journalists.⁶

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The monetization of digital narrative journalism has remained a challenge the whole time. According to Dowling & Vogan, in big media companies, digital longform stories are rarely profitable as such, but they build symbolic capital which leads to more indirect profits.⁷ For instance, “Snow Fall” in *The New York Times* was open access and did not include advertisements, but it directed people to *The New York Times* website and resulted in new subscriptions. Small start-up companies on the other hand have needed additional funding sources. As Evan Ratliff from *The Atavist* has mentioned, “it’s just really hard to grow a big business on things you sell for \$2–4 per month, as I think anyone would agree”.⁸ *The Atavist* has offered their platform to the public and made sponsor deals with advertisers. The Danish *Zetland* and the Finnish *Long Play* have offered consulting and training to companies and third sector organizations. Some publishers have had their writers produce content for others, and some have sold residual rights, to give but a few examples.⁹

From text-oriented to image-oriented and beyond

Digital environment adds several potential layers to stories compared with print media: audio, video, interactive elements. Nevertheless, there are examples of digital journalism publishers which are even more text-oriented than those in traditional print journalism. One example is *Long Play*, a Finnish publisher of longform journalism, which to this date has published 43 e-singles, merely three of which have had pictures in them. In 2014, then editor-in-chief explained this with two reasons: first, the modest initial capital of the publication, and second, the overall text-orientedness of the whole *Long Play* team.¹⁰

Another longform digital publisher whose representative called her team rather old-fashioned was the Danish *Zetland*. Their stories are clearly text-oriented, but *Zetland* organizes live shows which bring the magazine to life with music, readings, interviews etc.¹¹ Even though there is an obvious connection between the magazine and the live show, the live

shows can hardly be regarded as a solid part of the journalistic product. *The Atavist* on the other hand publishes stories which include audio clips, photos, maps, timelines and so on. However, all the elements are there to complement the text, which is clearly in the main role. Thus, *The Atavist* can be counted in the group of text-oriented publications.

An example of a step away from text-orientation can be found in NPR’s “Demolished. The end of Chicago’s public housing”. The dominant feature in the story are the photos taken by Patricia Evans. The text blocks are mainly short, caption-like explanations to the pictures. The demolition of the colossal apartment buildings is illustrated on the opening photo of the story: the houses in the background of the photo first turn magenta and then white, as they disappear from the scenery. Later on in the story there is a photo in which both the building and the people apparently playing sports in front of it both turn white and disappear. These simple but powerful tools create a strong user experience, which forms a distinct narrative, albeit not a text-oriented one.

A step even further on the path away from text-orientation is “After the storm”, by *The Washington Post*, Independent Lens and other partners. It reads like a movie or a documentary film, stretching the definition of journalism. The opening page gives instructions to the reader: how to navigate the site, how to get the most of the audio, and what to expect of the length of the experience. The story begins with a second person narrator talking to the reader, a future disaster survivor, taking them then back to the day before the storm hit his hometown. The story unfolds in 15 chronological sections, utilizing “the curtain effect” or “the parallax scroll” familiar from “Snow Fall”, supplying the reader with a sophisticated and immersive experience, indeed in a “cognitive container”.¹²

From linear to nonlinear and interactive

Media companies have not been particularly eager nor quick to take into use the different multimedia possibilities offered by new tech-

nology.¹³ In the beginning, the stories were often transmitted from print media to the World Wide Web as such. This has meant not only text-orientation, but also distinctively linear reading experiences, even though the nature of the Internet also enables nonlinear presentations. As such, a nonlinear text is a conceptual paradox: a written text and its reading process are linear by default. In the Western world we read horizontally from left to right, and we can only read one sequence at a time. Throughout time, however, the linearity of a story has been distracted in many ways, for instance by non-sequential, episodic, or multilinear storytelling in movies. In the popular gamebook series from the 1980's, *Choose your own adventure*, the reader gets to adapt the role of the protagonist and make decisions which determine the outcome of the story. The interactivity and the ability to choose are what makes those stories nonlinear to certain extent. Interactivity is the key to nonlinearity on the Internet as well. An example of nonlinear digital journalism could be an interactive story "In their words" by USA Today. In it the reader gets to choose which topics he/she wants to explore. Depending on the choices, the reader gets to "meet" a person who tells their experiences on video. This results in an individual user experience.

Another area worth mentioning is virtual reality, which creates new, extremely immersive experiences in digital storytelling. According to a Knight Foundation report, development in virtual reality in journalism has been increasingly fast since October 2015, and the user feedback has shown that people experience virtual reality stories very emotionally and viscerally.¹⁴ There are still challenges: the consumer market is very small, the headsets are expensive and uncomfortable and can create motion sickness, and the monetization remains a mystery.¹⁵ From the point of view of narrative journalism, however, probably the biggest challenge is to sustain the narrative while letting the user make decisions.

VR can allow users to explore scenes and discover characters and information at

their own pace, similar to how one navigates through a video game, which can provide a challenge to journalistic storytellers more familiar with taking the audience along a single narrative ride.¹⁶

From immersion to dispersion

The Internet offers enhanced means of immersion in forms of hypertextuality, multimodality, and interactivity.¹⁷ However, media companies have been rather slow in utilizing the potentials of multimedia narration. The reasons for this are versatile, but it came as a surprise to me in my 2014 essay, that even innovative start up entrepreneurs expressed rather conservative and cautious views. For instance, an independent journalist from the UK stated: "Certainly in the last two years we've seen publishers using lots of features at once because they could rather than because they should."¹⁸

Optimizing the experience of immersion has interested for instance game developers in the fields of entertainment as well as education. The cognitive load theory has been applied to studying the abilities and the restrictions of human working memory in multimedia environments.¹⁹ Information technologist Pierre Gander has questioned common beliefs about new storytelling media: that an audience's experience will be more immersive the more sensory information it is exposed to, and that the ability to participate and interact within the medium will add immersion.²⁰

Immersion goes hand in hand with authenticity. Photos, audio and video all add to the authenticity of a text. The level of immersion is also dependent on external factors: are there other sensory stimuli that may distract the reader? Some stories include reading instructions that guide the reader towards a more immersive experience, for instance by recommending using headphones. A native app ensures that the whole experience is controlled into "a cognitive container", but a standalone web page can work as well in creating an independent entity. How often can a media

company afford to create a standalone page for a story, is another question.²¹ In order to turn the reader of one standalone page into a subscriber of the whole publication is not an easy task. On the other hand, display advertising is challenged by the increasing usage of ad blocking both on desktop computers and mobile devices.²² The future of online advertising is unknown.

Conclusions

Digital narrative journalism has yet to prove its full potential, even though the development has been rapid during the 2010's. Narrative

journalism has traditionally been print- and text-oriented, but lately we have seen versatile examples of distinctly narrative multimedia-oriented stories. The Internet gives possibilities to go even further away from traditional text and create nonlinear journalism which builds on interactivity, such as virtual reality.

However, this sets a challenge of how to steer and sustain the narrative when the reader is given such a vast freedom of choice. The monetization of all digital narrative journalism is an unsolved puzzle which definitely restricts the artistic ambitions in media companies and may very well keep digital narrative journalism from its full bloom.

Notes

1. Lassila-Merisalo (2014a).
2. Maguire (2014, p. 51).
3. Royal & Tankard (2004).
4. Dowling & Vogan (2015, p. 211).
5. De Looper (2016).
6. Lassila-Merisalo (2014a, p. 10).
7. Dowling & Vogan (2015, p. 211).
8. Lassila-Merisalo (2014a).
9. Lassila-Merisalo (2014b, p. 165).
10. Lassila-Merisalo (2014a, p. 6).
11. See Zetland Magasin (2015).
12. Dowling & Vogan (2015, p. 211), Jacobson et al. (2016, p. 530). For a thorough analysis of the multimodal structure of longform stories such as "After the storm", see Hiippala (2016).
13. Steensen (2011, p. 320).
14. Doyle et al. (2016, p. 21).
15. Doyle et al. (2016).
16. Doyle et al. (2016, p. 23).
17. Berning (2011, p. 5).
18. Lassila-Merisalo (2014a, p. 8).
19. See Sweller (2005) and Schweppe & Rummer (2014).
20. Garner (2014).
21. Hiippala (2016, p. 17).
22. PageFair (2016).

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