Already in the 1990s, scholars working in the interdisciplinary field of narrative theory re-
cognized the predominance of experientia-
lity and world-building over events and plots
in stories. To give a simple example of this
paradigm shift: if the detective story used to
be the narrative prototype some decades ago,
now the mediascape is dominated by fantasy
fiction, a genre that is completely dependent
on imagination, and more precisely, on the
mind’s ability to construct worlds. Fan fic-
tion, as the emblem of the new media culture,
demonstrates to us that whereas plots may be
disposable, the world, with its imagined inha-
b bitants, is the anchor for the mind – and vice
versa. Furthermore, it is the immediate expe-
rience – in contrast to the more conventionally
narrative retrospect of conveying and reflec-
ting past events – that forms the very corner-
stone of many contemporary narrative envi-
ronments, such as social media and reality te-
levision. What’s on your mind? asks Facebook,
reminiscent of the centrality of performing
present-tense experience and emotions in our
daily lives. Why should apparently unreflected
moment-to-moment impressions be more in-
teresting – shareable – than well-thought-out
narrative syntheses on relevant events? Con-
temporary narrative theory should be able to
answer these questions.

The book *Narrative Theory, Literature,
and New Media. Narrative Minds and Virtual
Worlds* takes up the challenge. It is a topical
introduction to contemporary narrative theo-
ry and its emphases on human consciousness,
narrative world-building and intermediality.
The volume features illustrative analyses of
narratives across media, from literature to dig-
ital games and reality TV, from online sado-
masochism to oral history databases, and from
horror to hallucinations. The book is a refresh-
ingly interdisciplinary exchange between so-
cial scientists, literary scholars, linguists and
scholars from interactive media studies, offer-
ing a panoramic view of the field in an easily digestible form. The book addresses two core questions of contemporary narrative theory, inspired by recent cognitive-scientific developments and new narrative environments: what kind of a construction is a storyworld, and what kind of mental functioning can be embedded in it?

The book stresses the importance of studying the what – the entities and happenings in the world represented – and the how – the acts of telling and mediating the world and its agents of narratives closely together. The book advances semiotic sensitivity towards different medial environments, where varying platforms of storytelling, be it text messages, online discussion forums, horror novels or video games, have different affordances and restrictions to tell stories. While providing detailed readings of represented minds and worlds in different media, the authors of the book are also interested in the varying processes of interpretation triggered by different narrative environments. The emphasis on the human mind results in an intriguing double perspective: for example when discussing digital role-playing games such as The Mass Effect, we have the mind of the actual, flesh-and-blood user and the embedded “mind” of Commander Shepard, a cognitively curious amalgamation of the user’s performance and programming, as our potential objects of study. One of the central questions running through the book has to do with this double-perspective on cognition: how do story-internal minds relate to the mind external to the storyworld, the mind processing the story?

In some recent developments in narrative studies representational variation across media and genres has been downplayed in favour of searching for the cognitive universals of experiencing represented worlds. At the same time, narratological theories on embodied readerly immersion in storyworlds seem to emphasize the easy accessibility of textual universes. This book demonstrates that theory building depends both on the object of the study – what is regarded as a story? – and on the methods of study, since the concepts applied tend to direct the interest in phenomena they explain the best. Since the proliferation of stories, narratives and media, the field needs theories and methods where theory driven top-down and analysis driven bottom-up approaches are brought together, and universalist theories diversified to take into account the emergent new forms of storytelling.

If the detective novel, relying on sequentiality and suspense, has been supplanted by speculative universes and online experientiality, then how should we reformulate the narrative prototype? Or, can we deal with instant messages and hefty realist novels with the same concepts and theories? Is intermedial narrative theory possible? In his reflexive afterword for the book Brian McHale proposes a possible “new normal” for narrative studies implicit in the book’s chapters, a scene where the center and the periphery and the universal and the specific interact. Narrative studies no longer has a prototypical narrative or one overarching theoretical approach, but is in the state of multiple narratologies that may or may not work together under one goal. With its unity of topic and diversity of materials and analytical approaches, the book offers one exemplary for scholars from different disciplines to find common ground without loosing sight of their specific materials and analytical traditions.

The book is divided into four sections, each highlighting a different facet of the main issues at hand, namely intermedial and interactive mind and world construction in different narrative environments. Section One primarily comprises theoretical contributions that focus on the boundaries between texts, stories and narrative levels. It offers comprehensive insights into readerly engagement with narrative-representational levels and their transgressions. MarieLaure Ryan’s chapter elaborates on two trends in approaching narrative worlds, the cognitive approach, which regards the storyworld as a spatio-temporal totality whose evolution readers or spectators simulate mentally, and the ontological approach, which, inspired by possible worlds theory, focuses on the notion of the “fictional world,” and regards
“worlds” as defined over sets of propositions with mutually compatible truth values. Ryan outlines several possible relations between text, world and story: texts telling stories that spread over many worlds, texts presenting worlds that contain many stories, and worlds targeted by many different texts, often from different media. Liviu Lutas’s chapter investigates media differences in the use of narrative devices that transgress and distort the limits of narrative universes, putting metalepsis and syllepsis to the transmedial test. Lutas’s cinematic examples show how logocentrism has led to seemingly inappropriate classifications and conclusions that ought to be reworked in postclassical narratology. The final chapter of the first section, by Greger Andersson, comments on and evaluates the discussion of readers’ interaction with narrative fiction. Andersson analyses the roles allocated to lifelikeness and composability in narrative theory, while evaluating the “epistemic” and the “separatist” approaches to fiction, the previous regarding fictional narratives as a secondary variant of non-fictional narratives, the latter highlighting their distinctiveness.

Section Two brings together scholars working in diverse narrative environments that each address the problem of world generation in their specific ways. Hanna-Riikka Roine starts the section by addressing the ever-prevalent issue of narrativity in games. Roine takes an intermediary stand between narratologists and ludologists by suggesting that the emergent narrativity of digital games does not stipulate narrative communication; in her interpretation of The Mass Effect Trilogy, she anchors the emergent narrative and its meanings in the player’s experience of acting as the roleplaying character. Roine’s chapter is followed by another game studies contribution by Ben Samuel, Dylan Lederle-Ensign, Mike Treanor, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Josh McCoy, Aaron Reed, and Michael Mateas. In this chapter, the team discusses the interactive storytelling game Prom Week to demonstrate the vast potential for generating possible worlds in computer games, not just as mutually exclusive outcomes of gameplay but as actualized and meaningful versions of the same fictional world. Furthermore, Prom Week, a game developed by the authors themselves, is an experiment that ought to raise interest among social scientists, since it is based on a social artificial intelligence system inspired by Erwin Goffman’s “dramatological” approach to understanding social life. In the third chapter of Section Two, J. Tuomas Harviainen analyses a narrative environment hitherto unexplored by narrative theorists: sadomasochist play. He focuses on the relationship between predefined scripts such as desires, restrictions and conventions, and actualized narratives. Harviainen’s approach is intermedial as he studies the effect of platform—which can be the physical world, chat messages, or a virtual world played with avatars—on the forming and transforming of scripts, as well as on the possible worlds emerging in the games. Agnieszka Lyons closes Section Two with her pioneering study of text messages as potential narratives. In her linguistically oriented analysis, Lyons focuses on temporal sequences and storyworld generation, thus creating a theoretically illustrative juxtaposition between casual everyday communication and intentionally crafted stories.

Section Three focuses on mind representation and discusses minds that are determined by the genre, and minds that are difficult to access or deny access. In addition, this section addresses the (in)capability of language and narrative to represent and to make sense of experience. Tytti Rantanen’s chapter opens the discussion on represented minds with a notoriously challenging example, Marguerite Duras’s India Cycle, which consists of both text and film. Resisting the cognitivist assumption about the general accessibility of other people’s minds, Rantanen demonstrates how the failures in reading another mind can be built into an aesthetic principle that synthesizes Duras’s novelistic and cinematic expression. Gero Brümmer’s chapter approaches the problem of mind and experience from the generic viewpoint of horror literature. In Brümmer’s analysis, the motive of the indescribable monster proves to be a paradoxical vehicle
for immersing the reader in experiencing the storyworld because the traumatic encounter is typically conveyed through narrative distancing. Tommi Kakko continues on the theme of unreadable minds and ineffable experiences in his chapter on the tradition of hallucinatory narratives, taking his examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kakko demonstrates how drug literature’s radical experiential otherness can challenge the canonized narratological notions of naturalization and narrativization. The section closes with Alan Palmer’s chapter, which introduces a pioneering study on country and western music of American and British origin. Palmer’s analysis of song lyrics focuses on two types of narrative minds: the narrating instance or the protagonist as an experiencing individual, and the minds of other characters as they are attributed by these primary mental subjects.

Section Four compares social and literary models for mind-reading, mind attribution and mind construction, and their potential for accessing, portraying or documenting other minds. The emphasis lies on the mutual exchange of analytical methods and theoretical insights between the study of fictional and documentary materials, and between literary and social studies. Matti Hyvärinen’s chapter introduces a literary case study that both illustrates and challenges contemporary theories of mind attribution: the unreliable narrator of John Burnside’s A Summer of Drowning (2011) uses mindreading in all its complexity to shield herself from actual, potentially difficult and painful encounters with others. As Hyvärinen points out, this fictional novel challenges the prevailing optimistic notion of the social and the distributed mind as the optimal mental state that we would all benevolently strive for. Maria Mäkelä’s chapter tests the notion of mind attribution in the context of the reality game show Survivor. Reality TV is first and foremost about the performing individuals’ feelings and their feelings about others’ feelings, yet Mäkelä argues that the excess of expressivity in the confessional interviews—as well as the excess of speculation about other players’ mental states and intentions—creates generic distortion in this media laboratory which purports to reflect authentic social dynamics.

The problem of the medium’s effect on the represented mind or experience is further addressed in Jarmila Mildorf’s chapter, which provides a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to conversational storytelling as recorded in oral history internet databases. By using analytical methods from sociolinguistics, narratology, sociology and psychology, Mildorf examines how the internet as a medium shapes the narrative identity formation of the interviewee, the communicative situation of the interview, and the ways in which the speaker tries to engage the minds of the assumed audience. Mari Hatavara’s chapter probes the line between documentary and fictionalized experientiality in the web exhibition “A Finnish Winter Day.” Hatavara’s intermedial analysis of text and image reveals that the recording of everyday life by museum professionals uses techniques of mind representation that, in fact, fictionalize the documented everyday experiences. The use of fictionalized experientiality indeed gives the reader the feel of “what is it like” for the interviewees to go about their daily life, but at the same time it risks the clarity of intentions. In the final chapter, Brian McHale offers a commentary on the book’s theoretical and analytical contributions.