

Interview with Marie-Laure Ryan: on literature, videogames, new media and narratives

Ricardo Maciel dos Anjos¹



Marie-Laure Ryan. Foto: arquivo pessoal

Born in Geneva, Switzerland, Marie-Laure Ryan (PhD, French Literature, University of Utah, 1974) is an independent scholar based in Colorado. After studying French and German literature in Geneva, with some of the most prominent critics of the time (Jean Rousset, Jean Starobinski), she moved to Utah in the United States, where she pursued and completed a PhD in literature on French poet Saint-John Perse. A lack of career opportunities in the field sent her into computer science, which she studied in Colorado and in San Diego, California. This shift in focus made Marie-Laure see literature from a different perspective – one derived from linguistics, philosophy of language and artificial intelligence. Her first book, the 1991 *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, was an attempt to apply what she had learned from computer science and from the Possible Worlds theory – a theory elaborated upon by Thomas Pavel, Lubomír Doležel and Umberto Eco – to narrative. The technological boom of the

¹ Escritor, tradutor, doutor em literatura comparada pela Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. É autor dos livros da série de literatura fantástica *Saga de um mundo despedaçado: o continente perdido* (2012) e *Saga de um mundo despedaçado: depois do fim* (2017), com um terceiro volume já terminado e um quarto sendo escrito. E-mail: rmcanjos@gmail.com

mid-to-late 1990s, as well as the idea of virtual reality and its core components – interactivity and immersion, served as the inspiration for her second book, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), where she discusses immersion as an important component of the narrative experience, whatever the medium, and interactivity as an ideal that is very successfully implemented in computer games, but which is exceedingly difficult to reconcile with narrativity. Marie-Laure has also written *Avatars of Story* (2006), *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015) and *Narrating Space, Spatializing Narrative. Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (2020) and has edited *Narratives Across Media: The Language of Storytelling* (2004), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005), and *Intermediality and Storytelling* (2010), among others.

What drew you to new forms of media? How did you realize that these new, as yet unexplored media had true storytelling potential?

What drew me to digital media is the strange twists in my career. I started out as a literary scholar (writing a PhD dissertation on French poet Saint-John Perse); then, not finding any job in this domain, I studied computer science, especially artificial intelligence and worked a few years as a computer programmer. Then I was laid off and did not feel like going back to a cubicle in a big company, so I returned to the humanities and applied what I knew about computers to narrative theory. This led me to investigate the narrative potential of digital media, especially VR (which did not really exist when I became interested in it, it was purely virtual). Then I moved to the narrative potential of other media as well, such as film, theater, comics, etc. But since I am not a specialist in those fields, I thought it wiser to rely on experts, and this is how my edited collection *Narrative Across Media* was born. As far as computer games, I must admit that I do not have the patience to play long ones, and my expertise is based on short casual games that require no physical skills, on watching my son play classic shooters, on reading, and on speculation. My son has now left the nest, and has renounced video games in favor of yoga and rock climbing, so I am missing my main informant. Right now, I feel a little bit rusty as far as video game theory and research is concerned and I am not aware of any new important development in the field, beside the rise of gaming as spectator sport.

What do you think of the current status of videogames as an art form? Are they really a valid medium, or is that argument moot? If you consider them to be so, how do they best bring about that potential artistic-ness?

The artistic potential of video games depends on two criteria: their interest as representations (of a world, characters, events); and their ludic value as systems of rules and as mode of action. As Jesper Juul has shown, some games, i.e., systems of rules, have an intrinsic elegance, or beauty, because the rules allow a variety of situations and actions while remaining fairly simple themselves. Good examples of this game aesthetics are Go and Chess; Tic-Tac-Toe by contrast is not very elegant because there is only one winning strategy and it is too easy to discover. Video games can be artistic in that sense by devising new forms of gameplay. I think that the development of the play formula that underlies shooters or simulation games was originally a significant achievement of almost artistic value. But after a while gameplay formulas become standardized and are no longer creative. So artistic value has to shift to more traditional sources of aesthetic effect, such as visuals or narrative content. As far as visuals go, there is no question that games can achieve art; whether realistic or abstract, games display tremendous graphic creativity. As far as narrative content goes, this is more problematic, because as I have stressed in my work there is a conflict between user freedom and top-down control. (This is known as the interactive paradox). The fact that games are primarily designed for action may distract users from the game narrative; the desire to solve problems or to beat other players is difficult to reconcile with aesthetic appreciation, which needs a distance and reflection that is not possible when players are caught in a dangerous situation and must react quickly in order to save their life. The aesthetic appreciation of game design and game narrative may therefore come retrospectively, not during gameplay but afterwards when players reflect on their experience and on the design that allowed it. This conflict between interest in problem-solving and interest in the gameworld and game story may explain why recent games that ambition to convey interesting ideas (such as *The Stanley Parable*) have resorted to very simple gameplay that does not attract much attention. These games are known as “Walking simulators,” because all the user needs to do is explore the storyworld by manipulating the controls. They are despised by pure gamers, of course, but loved by people who do not really like games.

In an article titled “Games are better without stories”² Ian Bogost has argued against the potential of games to provide narrative and therefore artistic interest. He claims that the story told in the walking simulator *What Remains of Edith Finch* would be better served by making it into a movie or telling it in a novel. And indeed, if a story truly captivates the reader, the effort needed to discover it by finding a way to progress through the gameworld and uncovering narrative information may be more annoying than gratifying. It could very well be that game stories have not reached the artistic heights and diversity of the best novels, dramas, and films, and possibly never will, because they need to give the user something to do, and this need restricts narrative possibilities. But even if their narrative potential does not rival that of novels or film, computer games still have much to gain by trying to realize this potential. So, in response to Bogost I say: games *can* be made better through stories, but one should not expect game stories to be the only source of pleasure. There is also the ludic pleasure of achieving game goals.

Do you think literature has anything to learn from new forms of media - videogames in particular? If so, what elements unique to these media could literature aim to absorb and/or learn from?

I think that the greatest contribution of digital media to artistic expression is to have promoted multi-modality by integrating the visual, the textual, the aural, and user agency (i.e., interactivity). This multimodality is of course no longer “literature” in the classic sense. As discussed above, I also think that we are now seeing games that are closer to literature because they rely more on narrative interest and ideas than on competitive gameplay. As far as literature becoming more game-like there is certainly a ludic tradition in literature, exemplified for instance by the Oulipo school, but that movement precedes video games. If by literature we mean purely language-based art that can be printed in books, the only possibility I can imagine of games influencing literature is on the thematic level: we can have novels about all sorts of aspects of videogames, such as how videogames affect people’s lives, or the blurring of the borderline between game worlds and the real world. But this is already occurring in science fiction and also in realistic fiction. For games to influence literature in a more

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/>

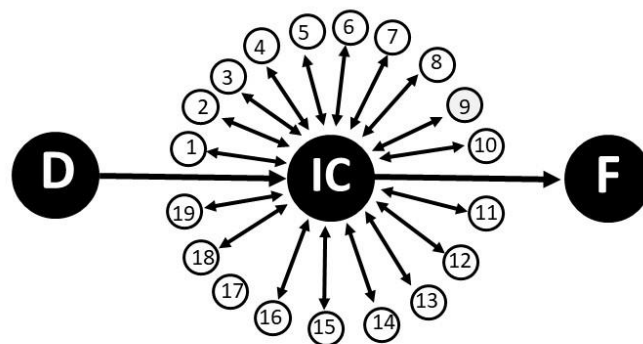
strategic way, on the level of user involvement, we need another support than books, we need digital media, we need a hybridization of games and literature. What this hybridization can be, is up to the creators to show.

You mention short, casual games that require no physical skills. I can tell, from my own experience, that these too can be amazing for storytelling, even when they are not one of the so-called walking simulators (which I have my own, oft-conflicting opinions about, both as a gamer and as a writer). My PhD thesis includes a delightful little indie point-and-click title called *Memoranda*, which introduces elements from a selection of short stories by Japanese author Haruki Murakami into a singular world, and weaves a roughly 2-hour story around them. From your experience (both first and second-hand) with video/computer games, is there any that stands out in regards to the narrative strategies or techniques they may have utilized? Or any in which the storytelling experience is improved by the ludic aspect?

In response to your question, I can mention one work that I really liked (and that is not commercially available) *Annalena* by Daniel Bouillot (in French). I loved it because of its graphic inventiveness, because the story is not randomly scrambled as in hypertext but rather easy to follow though interactive, and also, because it awakened in me nostalgia for “le midi,” the sunny landscapes of the French Riviera. And in addition, it made me discover the painter Nicolas de Stael. All in all, I think that the best chance for digital narrative is to bet on multimodality—text, sound, music, video clips. Below is a short description of *Annalena* that I wrote in a paper on spatial configuration of digital works.

Annalena tells the story of Pierre, a photographer who travels from Paris to Antibes to take pictures of the brilliant light of the French riviera. On his way he takes a mysterious auto-stopper named Anna. During his stay in Antibes, Pierre runs several times into Anna, and she initiates him into the landscape, as well as into the work of the painter Nicolas de Staël, who lived in Antibes and committed suicide by throwing himself from a roof. Anna convinces Pierre that the true way to capture the light of the Mediterranean is through painting, not photography. Pierre falls in love with Anna as much as with the places she helps him discover, and he tries to capture her by taking her photo unbeknownst to her. In so doing he violates a taboo, and she disappears forever from his life. The diagram on figure 2 represents the spatial architecture of the text. It

begins with an introduction (D) narrating Pierre’s trip from Paris to Antibes and his meeting with Anna. Then readers reach node IC, a slightly overexposed photo of Antibes (to signify the inferiority of photography), on which they click randomly. Depending on where they click on the screen, they activate an episode which unfolds linearly: each screen contains only one link, and after completing the sequence, readers return to node IC. After each episode, a whole area of the Antibes photo turns into a painting with much richer colors. The process repeats itself 19 times for the 19 episodes, each of which contains an autonomous episode, so that they can be read in any order. At any point in the reading, users know exactly how much they have read and how much remains to be read. When all the episodes have been visited, the photograph is fully transformed into a painting, in accord with the thematics of the text, and an epilogue (node F) puts an end to the narrative arc, giving users the satisfaction of having concluded their journey.



What do you think about the statement that games drive people away from literature? Would you say this is a problem, or merely a consequence of people having more and different storytelling media available to them?

On a practical level, yes, games drive people away from literature because there is only so much time to devote to leisurely activities. And this is sad. But then, TV did the same thing, though TV is now developing innovative, intellectually stimulating narrative forms, the so called “quality TV” of serials like *Mad Men*. (But TV is disappearing as a narrative medium, replaced by platforms like Netflix.) On a theoretical level, it would

be wonderful if people had time to try all the storytelling media available and were able to compare them, but I am afraid that only students of media (a privileged class) will be able to do so. As I have written elsewhere, a problem for digital media is to reach a group located half way between “the tropics” of mass culture and “the north pole” of avant-garde experiments. Literature is located halfway in what I call the temperate zone. It would be so sad if the temperate zone were to disappear due to cultural climate change.

One theory that I particularly enjoy is Julian Kücklich's (and Brenda Laurel's, by extension) notion that the role of the player of a videogame would be somewhat similar to that of a spectator in a dramatic play that can step up to the stage and perform a role. The rules of gameplay would then be something akin to the director of the stage play establishing some limitations as to what the actor-spectator can and cannot do. What do you think of this model? Do you think there is any sort of unexplored potential link between videogames and performance arts?

There is no question that improv theater, street theater (Augusto Boal), *commedia dell'arte* and role-playing games (RPGs) provide a model for a kind of emergent narrative overcoming the limitations of AI, since natural intelligence is (narratively, thanks to its life and literary experience) far more intelligent than the artificial kind. Theoretically, then, I think it's an excellent model—but how do you implement it for a situation where a user is facing a computer screen and running a single-user application? To make it work one would need a multi-user system where the users, rather than the system, produce the story, but success would overwhelmingly depend on the participant's creativity and willingness to cooperate. In role-playing games the game master's input plays a large role in providing an exciting experience for the participants; could it be simulated by a system? If not, just forget about technology and play role-playing games. I must add that this kind of high participation is not for everybody; most of us prefers “passive” books, films and plays, because they are sufficiently challenging to the imagination. But then, no art or entertainment form is for everybody, so that's not a valid argument. Incidentally I have never played role-playing games but I have read about them through the work (in French) of Olivier Caira, who is a very persuasive ambassador for the genre. My impression, though, is that the pleasure of RPGs is

primarily social – you need a good group of friends and some wine or beer – and the computer cannot substitute for that.