THE EVOLUTION OF A NEW SPECIES OF STORY

LISA GRIFFITHS

Technology has accelerated communication. NBN, Wi-Fi and 4G have contributed to a rapidly changing media environment where narratives must adapt or die. Time and space are fundamental to narrative, they connect cause and effect in a story (Frierson, 2018, p. 103). The temporal architecture of our lives and stories comprises of "millions of single individual time fragments, moments and episodes" (Pantzar, 2014, p. 4). In our on-the-go internet world, these narrative fragments become content arranged by newsfeed algorithms into unending collages of time and space. In this environment, a new species of story is evolving – 'presentist' literature (Rushkoff, 2013, p. 34). This essay examines two new species with innovative survival strategies: *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011 – 2019) and *The Witcher* (Netflix, 2019 –).

Narrative by Space - *Game of Thrones*

Game of Thrones creates an innovative approach to storytelling by combining cable subscription platform technology[1] and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). The gaming influence is obvious in title and the opening credits (Figure 1).[2] The map resembles a role-playing game board set-up for character pieces. Unlike a boardgame, the setting is in constant motion and the mechanics beneath the structures slide puzzle-like pieces into place. The viewing angle is also in motion and placing the viewer inside the game. Actor names appear next to a small avatar-like portrait similar to the identifier convention of videogames. The opening credits foreshadow that the story's hero is not a character; it is the world itself.

---

[1] Until HBO moved its content to a streaming service.
[2] The opening credits have changed over the eight seasons. Figure 1 is the most recent and is similar enough to previous versions to use as an example for this argument.

A MMORPG exists as a perpetual virtual world. Players are digitally represented by an avatar characterised by broad categories like gender, class, race, and faction. Players compete with other players in "loosely structured [and] open-ended narratives" (Steinkuehler, 2006, *Understanding MMOs*). The world is mapped by exploration and participating in quests or mission, activities combining mechanics, plotlines, and problem-solving rather than an overarching narrative journey.[3] This is because dramatic elements in videogames are usually subordinate to formal elements of gameplay; narrative and character are designed to perpetuate play (Fullerton, 2013, p.44). Creating a satisfying resolution to an overarching narrative is not the point of this narrative structure (Rushkoff, 2013, p.33). Instead, MMORPGs satisfy players with "higher play elements of repetition and alternation" within the magic circle (Huizinga, 1955, p.10). A large number of shallow characters competing in a perpetual world of repetitive plot and problem-solving is the nature of MMORPG and the premise of *Game of Thrones*.

Game of Thrones is television content created by HBO cable network in 2011. In 2015 the show moved to HBO Now, an internet video-on-demand (VOD) service but retained the cable convention of weekly scheduling of new episodes. The premium network subscription, followed by VOD, gave access to prior episodes and commercial-free viewing which influenced the serial narrative structure of *Game of Thrones* (Butler, 2018, p. 28). Unlike free-to-view soap operas, *Game of Thrones* avoided interval disruption of ad-breaks.[4] So there was no need to build segmented tension, resulting in a serial with a structure more like a series, each episode ending on a beat (Butler, 2018, p. 38). VOD afforded viewers the ability to catch-up on missed episodes, re-watch previous episodes before the next instalment, and new viewers could join-in without feeling they missed too much of the story[5]. This is important to serial narrative structures because they require audiences to make a "substantive connection between episodes" (Butler, 2018, p.40).

The survival strategy of *Game of Thrones* was using VOD technology to deviate from the established narrative structure of a serial. Scheduling added a frustration to the viewing experience similar to the flow of videogaming (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.82). The multi-character plotlines were influenced by MMOPRGs use of repeated problem-solving and exploring a world-state rather than the

---

[3] Notable exceptions include everything made by BioWare, even *Anthem* (2019).
[4] *Game of Thrones* – a soap opera that replaced ad-breaks with dragons.
[5] 4Gs launch in 2014 prompted HBO to create an app specifically for catching-up with *Game of Thrones* episodes for non-subscribers.

epic journey of a hero/es. Aristotelian narrative uses the world-state to explore a character/s, *Game of Thrones* inverts this dynamic to tell a "sociological story instead of a psychological one" (Alessandro, 2019, s Solving Problems). Characters drive similar plotlines in different parts of the world to layer multiple perspectives of the world until the world has more layers than the characters. The structure is limited by the lack of narrative climax, the game never ends. The story is compelling because of game-based iteration but jeopardises audience investment by creating drama without the meaning provided by and overarching narrative or satisfying denouement.

Narrative Time - *The Witcher*

The Witcher creates an innovative approach to storytelling influenced by VOD and the algorithmic library of Netflix. The complete first season of *The Witcher* 'dropped' on Netflix. Netflix uses an algorithm to organise its content by consumer-preferred themes rather than a traditional alphabetical or chronological system. This is an interactive system, personalising content by the thematic structure of information (Cinque, 2015, p. 59). Netflix algorithms make a relationship with the viewer.[6] The strategy of releasing all episodes simultaneously creates the choice of watching the entire season (Butler, 2018, p.35). The thematic structuring and binge-watching combine to create a deeply engaging series narrative structure.

An example of *The Witcher's* thematic structuring is shown in *Betrayer Moon* (Figure 2).[7] Like *Game of Thrones*, multiple linear storylines are shown concurrently, but instead of space separating characters, it is time. In *Betrayer Moon*, the audience is informed of time-shifting by Foltest's presence in both storylines; one as a child, the other as a father (Butler, 2018, p. 273). Linear chronology exists within each storyline and the characters follow the traditional narrative structure of set-up, confrontation, and resolution. But he beats of each character's journey are interwoven in the scene (Frierson, 2018, p.102). This technique tells their unwritten relationship and foreshadows the acrimonious but transformative nature of their 'future' connection. Parallel storytelling builds layers of narrative like a personal conversation; when it happened is less relevant than the empathy created by correlating experiences. This 'conversation' is intensified and elongated by loosening the episode instalment structure of a series.

---

[6] Seeing someone's Netflix home screen is peering into their viewing habits, tastes, preferences.
[7] The whole scene was not available to embed in this essay but is available on Netflix - S1:E3 *Betrayer Moon* [00:39:00 – 00:58:00].

The Netflix strategy of releasing entire seasons of original content enables binge-watching. Streaming technology means consumers no longer rely on downloading, DVDs, or remote controls to sustain consumption. Netflix removes interruption from commercials or credits, the automated 'next episode' function enables viewers to consume an entire series in one sitting (Butler, 2018, p.50). This phenomenon alters the traditional episodic design of a series to a 'binge-able' narrative structure. To prevent audience attrition, "episodes are becoming more and more like chapters in a novel" (Butler, 2018, p. 51). And like the novels it is based on, *The Witcher* uses fractal complexity to maintain engagement; layering satisfying micro-narratives into larger and larger ones.

The innovative survival strategy for *The Witcher* is using technology's influence to create a personal connection with the audience. As content designed for the VOD platform, the series structure adapted to prolonged viewer habits and novel-based storytelling methods. Algorithmic personalisation and content arrangement unified the story by correlating characters' experiences. Showing the characters' overlapping narrative "illuminat[es] who they really are" (Field, 2005, p. 87). *The Witcher* adapted to binge-watching by adding detail associated with the original books. For example, the title screens foreshadow the themes of the upcoming chapter, connecting them to the overarching narrative[8]. The limitation of mapping narrative with dislocated time is the disorientation of the audience. The audience must listen carefully or re-watch to make sense of temporal shifts.[9]

Technology influences the eternally present narrative of 'here' and 'now' in online spaces. It fractures and restructures the temporal architecture of our lives and stories. Both HBO and Netflix provide content to fit platform technology, and the lifestyle and technology of the audience. The evolution of these stories was engineered to exist in a specialised habitat. *Game of Thrones* explores Westeros from the 'here' perspective of every character. It builds layers of repeating plot to reiterate and perpetuate the story of the world. It is influenced by MMORPG and relies on the mechanics of the world to immerse audiences and create serial enigma. *The Witcher* explores the character relationships by correlating their journeys in parallel 'now'. It builds layers of complexity in the

---

[8] *Betrayer Moon* contains the transformation of Yennefer and the Striga. As well as the moon symbolising transformation in the fantasy genre, Renfri (S1:E1) was a princess born under an eclipse and Geralt kills her. This is part of Geralt's redemptive narrative arc. By connecting Yennefer to the Striga princess, Yennefer's significance to Geralt is amplified.
[9] Although, this adds a layer of immersion by repetitive viewing and 'whisper-in-a-crowd' effect, encouraging the audience to pay attention.

narrative and invites the audience to linger in the psychology of the characters. It is influenced by the interconnected relationship between humans and technology created by algorithms and human behaviour. These examples of 'presentist' literature demonstrate how technology can directly and indirectly influence narrative's evolution into a new species of story.

References

Alessandro, D., (2019). *What Game of Thrones Teaches Us About Innovation*. Pacific Lutheran

    University. Sourced from https://www.plu.edu/innovation-studies/news/what-game-of-

    thrones-teaches-us-about-innovation/

Butler, J. (2018). *Television*. New York: Routledge,

    https://doi-org.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/10.4324/9781315181295

Cinque, T., (2015). *Changing Media Landscapes: visual networking*. Oxford University Press, Australia

    and New Zealand

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). The conditions of flow. In *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience* (pp.

71-93). New York: Harper & Row.

Field, S., (2005). *Screenplay*. Random House, New York.

Fullerton, T., (2013). *Game Design Workshop: a playcentric approach to creating innovative games*

    (3rd e.). Apple Academic Press, Canada

Huizinga, J. (1955). Nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon. In *Homo*

    ludens : a study of the play-element in culture (pp. 1-27). Beacon Press, Boston.

Pantzar, M., (2010). Future shock: Discussing the changing temporal architecture of daily life. *Journal*

    of Futures Studies. 14. 1-22.

Rushkoff, D., (2013). *Present Shock: When everything happens now*. Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Figures

Figure 1: Wall, A., & Sintani, K., (2019*). HBO Game of Thrones Opening Credits: Season 8* [digital animation]. Elastic TV https://elastic.tv/project/game-of-thrones-season-8/ .

Embedded video retrieved from https://youtu.be/TZE9gVF1QbA

CONTENT WARNING: HORROR, NUDITY, VIOLENCE

Figure 2: Lopez, A. G., (2019). *Betrayer Moon* [*The Witcher*, S1:E3, 00:51:51 – 00:54:30] [Television]. Netflix. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/e-hwFYHUSdc