

'Narrative itself is a kind of user experience design for organizing the look and feel of reality.'

IAN CHENG

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I'm nine years old watching *Jurassic Park* (1993) at the cinema for the third time. The velociraptor is hunting the kids in the kitchen when the edge of the scene suddenly bursts into white lava. I don't remember this happening before. I lean forward in my seat, excited to discover a new detail. The effect blooms everywhere. Humans and dinosaurs erode into abstract bleeding blobs. Someone screams up at the dysmorphic raptor, then back at the projectionist. I look back at the booth – the fucking film is on fire. Projectionist and flames jumping around up there. House lights come on. Ushers guide us to emergency exits. Outside in the parking lot, everyone stands searching, squinting. No one knows what to do or how to behave. There were no plans to be anywhere else right now.

Narrative is itself an intuitive technology for normalizing change, for cohering the experience of reality into a sequence of measured consequential developments – a kind of user experience (UX) design for organizing the look and feel of reality.

But sometimes random, unscripted, unforgiving, unmotivated, inexplicable shit happens. Contingency is change happening faster than a human being can immediately narrate, when the UX can't keep up in real time.

The degree to which human beings can deploy narrative as a format for cohering the cameos of reality's contingencies is related to the frequency with which we have to deal with those contingencies. An isolated cinema fire in 1993 can be UXed in its retelling.

But now it's 2013, and there's the feeling that the straight story can no longer normalize the complex, unpredictable forces of reality that intrude with greater and greater frequency, let alone the incessant stream of big data reporting on these complexities. What is the intuitive story of climate change? Shifts in the market? Mutations in your brain? Your browsing history?

Specialists turn to non-intuitive technologies like quantitative analysis, simulation modelling and probability in order to trace narratives that account for the present and make predictive narrations of the near future. But for the rest of us, this kind of non-human storytelling is counterintuitive to our intuitive UX. We receive it, but we don't feel it, so we can't embody it. Anxiety takes hold when embodied narration fails.

The evolution of the narrative form necessitates mutating our intuitive UX for storytelling with a coefficient of persistent anxiety. Anxiety is a condition that cannot be eradicated, but can be managed. Is it possible to shift from a culture that wallows in anxiety towards the creation of narrative tools that contain and manage a bug of anxiety within them?

Imagine a narrative format that has probabilistic outcomes.

Imagine a narrative format that can simulate unscripted contingencies against scripted choreography.

Imagine a narrative format that requires its authors to embrace contingency and irreversibly change during its making.

Imagine a narrative format that doesn't promise a scheduled time to end.

Imagine a narrative format that erodes as you erode.

Some formats are already technically here. Recent treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder deploy virtual reality simulation – brimming with contingency and algorithmic anxiety – as a complement to classic therapeutic narration.

But that's just the tip. To be ready for the future is not to imagine outlandish cure-all technologies, but to do the work of developing formats to integrate intuitive and non-intuitive technologies towards unnatural normalization.

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TIMOTHEUS VERMEULEN

Ian offers an intriguing and inspiring account of the correlation between narrative innovation and technological development, which I find myself mostly agreeing with. There are a few thoughts I would like to develop further:

I agree that narrative is our intuitive technology for making sense of change. Each new narrative development, whether it is a (inter)medial progression or one within a medium, allows us to make sense of new kinds of changes – changes that may have previously seemed contingent. (What we mean when we say something is contingent is, after all, not that it is simply random or meaningless but that its meaning is dependent on a variable.) The 19th-century novel, for instance, by devoting as much attention to the working classes as to the higher echelons of society, enabled people to contemplate changes pertaining to democratization. Modernist art, flattening and fragmenting, did much the same for Structuralist notions of identity.

To be sure, this relationship between narrative and change is not causal. New narrative forms or techniques emerge from new social and technological configurations, which in turn arise from new narrative forms. It's a chicken-and-egg kind of thing.

What people call art, or have come to call art since Romanticism, is often a practice that develops such a new form. Jacques Rancière praised Gustave Flaubert's ability to turn literature from a hierarchical medium into a more egalitarian discipline, where not only king and pauper are equal, but also plot and detail, foreground and background. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze admired the way Francis Bacon developed painting from representation into potentialization. Often such developments show what the medium is capable of and signal its limitations. Surely Flaubert's strategies would be better suited to photography, just as Bacon's operations appear to presuppose the

medium of film. So here the function of 'art' is simultaneously to deconstruct the existing rules of narration and to devise alternative, as-yet-unimaginable models.

In this respect, I think Ian is right to suggest that new narrative technologies can integrate the intuitive and 'non-intuitive', and can create hopeful narratives that contain 'a bug of anxiety within them'. I believe this is already happening. Ian's own work, *Entropy Wrangler* (2012), is a case in point, as are Ragnar Kjartansson's *Sorrow Conquers Happiness* (2006), Guido van der Werve's *Nummer acht, Everything is going to be alright* (2007), Yael Bartana's work on the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (2007–11) and Mariechen Danz's *Cube Cell Stage* (2012). Kjartansson, for instance, sets out to change the meaning of the titular sentence even though its meaning is semantically fixed. Bartana calls for the foundation of a Jewish state in one of the most anti-Semitic countries on earth. The Postmodern specialists Ian mentions asked 'What if?' But this question is not a question of development. It is a question of stagnation. When you ask 'what if?' you close down possibilities: you calculate all the paths you could logically take from your current position. What Kjartansson and Bartana wonder about is 'as if'. Let's act, they say, as if it is possible to do something we know it is not. Pretending opens up possibilities: it imagines alternative routes without regard for logic or reason. Ian, Kjartansson, Bartana – they all contemplate the possibilities that new technologies may offer for narratives, simply by pushing a particular kind of narration beyond its own limits.

If it is true that Web 2.0 and the blogosphere have returned the people to the public sphere – producing debate, participating in the narration of our times – then it is the people that can best answer how digital media will influence storytelling. Silly as it may seem, my answer is: DIY, probe your own narrative forms, and find out.

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FATIMA AL QADIRI

What if the 'what if' that Timotheus proposes were transmogrified to posit the question, 'What if Arabic writing were to accommodate technological mutations in the future?' Will this orthographic mutation affect Arabic narrative structures?

What if, via the blogosphere, as Timotheus speculates, Arabic were returned to the people to participate in the narrative of their times – that is, revolutionary times? For those unaware, Arabic is a triglossic language – meaning it exists simultaneously as the Classical Arabic of religion as the journalistic and literary Modern Standard Arabic, and as the various regional spoken Arabic languages – the orthography of which has