
A SYNERGY OF DIGITAL ERA AND CHILDREN'S BOOKS: CHRONOTOPIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF CHILDREN'S LITERARY WORLDS

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Abstract

Contemporary children's literature has been steadily unfolding beyond the letters and words on a page. Emerging technologies, new and ever-changing forms of communication, audiovisual designing have all contributed into creating various transformed modes of representation, enhanced with visual, narrative and verbal characteristics, that children interact and connect with: e-books, hypertexts, virtual gaming worlds etc. This unique combination of textual, visual and verbal elements presents an expansive and rather challenging field of representation and interpretation for creators as well as a new way of experiencing and "living through" a story (or multiple stories) for the "readers". Thus, the written, handheld book becomes a digital copy with images and sounds or a virtual world with narration and dialogues in simultaneity with the action, where the reader-player becomes the hero (or the villain etc.) and creates his own storyline. In that way, the variability, interactivity and open-endedness of these literary worlds may produce variable instances of place and time, altering several times the initial chronotopy of a children's literary text. The present article begins by exploring the interactive, hypertextual, immersive elements of children's literature and then continues to trace the transformative elements of time and space that exist into them. Moreover, it attempts to answer the question of how the new technologies and their synergy with children's books can enrich children's literary experience, thus offering an active world of imagination, creativity and learning.

Keywords: children's books, audiobooks, digital transformation

Introduction

Nowadays, children are constantly surrounded by media-rich environments - television, DVDs, MP3s, Touch/iPhones, computers, video games, cell phones, smart toys, 3D goggles are almost ever present in developed countries. (Cricher, 2008; Drotner & Livingston 2008; Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon, & Olafsson, 2009; Linebarger & Piotrowski, 2009). Their contact with digital worlds is almost an everyday occurrence (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Byron Review, 2008; Druin, 2009; Guernsey, 2007; Marsh, 2004; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Marsh, Brooks, Hughes, Ritchie, Roberts, & Wright, 2005; McPake, Stephen & Plowman, 2007; Pahl & Roswell, 2006; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Shuler, 2007; 2009; Specht, 2009; Stephen, McPake, Plowman, & Berch- Heyman, 2008). This digitization of form, content and presence has not left literature unaffected. Handheld books went on becoming digitised and wholly digital books were created (Koskimaa 2000). These trends have also entered into the world of Children's Literature leading to multi-layered, nonlinear, non-sequential, interactive and graphic- rich books that bear small to great differences from their handheld counterparts (Dresang 1997). This particular research focuses on how this emergent and transformed field alters the ideas of chronos (time) and topos (space) for readers.

Children's Literature

The fundamental cultural changes that have been brought forward with the rise of electronic media have brought along the development of new forms of expression (Koskimaa 2007). These new forms have variably influenced book production transforming handheld books into digital ones, a fact that relates to children and their innate affinity for anything that offers them new communication capabilities (Dresang 1997). At this point though, it is considered productive to examine how children and their world is perceived, construed and constructed by society and especially by adults, so that light is shed to the effect of the digital transformation. There is a large number of studies on adults' perceptions of childhood (Aries, 1962; Cleverley & Phillips, 1986; Pollack, 1983; Hawes & Hiner, 1985; Nodelman, 1992; Warner, 1994, pp. 43-62; Nodelman, 1996, pp. 67-87). There is also a relevant number that comments on the way adults perceive children as revealed in their literature (Avery, 1994; Bingham & Scholt, 1980; Lurie, 1990; Griswold, 1992; Rose, 1992; MacLeod, 1994; Nodelman, 1996, pp. 91-136). Children are thought to be innocent, naïve, good, morally superior to adults or otherwise undisciplined, savage, morally inferior, hurried into adulthood or sacred into their childhood, thus leading to many assumptions. Nodelman comments upon this fact:

“The danger in the assumptions [is that] ...they define childhood almost exclusively in terms of its limitations: What most characterizes children is that they are less knowledgeable, less resilient, less resistant to influence than adults. If these ideas are true then children’s ability to respond to literature with any degree of . . . understanding is seriously limited.”

But, as a multitude of later researches show (Nodelman 1996, Sendak 1994, Papert 1992), children in contemporary world’s conditions do not need to be protected from the “outside” as:

“The children know. They have always known. But we choose to think otherwise; it hurts to know the children know. The children see. If we obfuscate, they will not see. Thus we conspire to keep them from knowing and seeing.”

Papert(1992) also notes that children have an affinity for the computer that is difficult for adults to understand. In the current era the new generation is completely overwhelmed by the latest technological advances. Alternatively, it could be said that today’s children are growing up digital. Their view of the world is very different from that of adults, thanks to unprecedented access to information, people, and ideas across highly interactive media (Burkhardt, et al., 2003).

With stories and literature children can imagine the extraordinary, believe the impossible, experience the unfamiliar and see themselves in the lives of the characters. They can show them the possibilities, and the freedom, which childhood offers them (Gilman 2005). Furthermore, digital media can further enhance these experiences by letting them view reality through a different medium.

The digitalisation of literature has proceeded on at least three fronts simultaneously, and these fronts have only lately merged – this merging being the main cause for the attention on digital literature (Koskimaa 2000).

Digital Worlds

As Koskimaa points out, “digital literature is very diffuse and very hard to define” (Koskimaa 2000). He continues discerning three different instances. Firstly, he presents the digitalisations of print literature, as works which aim at digitalising as comprehensively as possible the old, mostly canonical, literature, with a lot of practical attributes such as conserving old texts physically deteriorating, making rare works available for the larger public, creating useful corpuses for researchers and students and enabling all kinds of statistical style analyses. He considers as a second type the digital publication of original literature, where texts do not employ any hypertextual techniques at all and literature conforms to the established conventions. Here, he argues that digital form is primarily used in the distribution of the texts. Last but not least, comes the literature using new techniques made possible by the digital format, including everything from hypernovels to interactive poetry and multimedia encyclopaedias (Koskimaa 2000).

Later, Koskimaa goes on creating another categorisation of digital literature. He again distinguishes three different meanings but here he assigns totally different categorisations. First, comes Digital Publishing, which focuses on the production and marketing of literature, and books in general, with the aid of digital technology. It includes eBooks, Print on Demand, Audiobooks made available as MP3 files, etc. He considers it, content-wise, literature in the traditional sense, as digital technology mainly serves for packaging and distribution purposes. As a second category, Scholarly literary hypertext editions for educational and research purposes are presented. This category includes hypertextually annotated literary works, as well as multimedia implementations of literary classics. Due to royalty rights, these are mainly older works. Finally, the third category comprises writing for Digital Media which he considers as programmed text, text based on computer code. This opens up a limitless field of literary play and experimentation, as texts can be programmed to behave in a more or less dynamic way. This perspective is called ‘cybertextuality’ and the works ‘cybertexts’, in accordance with Espen Aarseth (1997). Cybertextuality is an umbrella term for different types of digital texts, such as hypertexts, kinetic texts, generated texts, texts employing agent technologies, etc. There are also poetic works using interactivity and kinetic techniques. (Koskimaa 2007). There are also the digital games and its various genres. In addition to the mainstream game genres, such as action, adventure, sports, and puzzle games, the subfields of news games, political games, advergames, edugames, and such, bring the game approach to cultural fields where it has never played such a prominent role before. These new kinds of works are characterised as ‘cybertexts’ or ‘technotexts’ (Aarseth 1997, Hayles 2002). No matter what the chosen term, it is important to keep in mind the plurality that is easily forgotten behind the unifying umbrella term: there is a huge variation of possible approaches to the new textuality, and it is easy to forecast that, so far, we have just seen the first glimpses of what is to come and the novel possibilities opened up for research by hypertextuality and other digital technologies (McGann, 2006). So, a whole world can be created that corresponds to the extreme transience of perceived space, one unveiled by the creative force of the invisible, by the power of absence and dream.

Time and Space

Concepts of time and space are widely challenged in the electronic era. As Tsatsou argues “electronic media and communications play a complex part in shifting conceptions of time and space, expressing the need for redefining and reconceptualising the terms in question through the notion of ‘mediation’” (Tsatsou 2009). This disturbance of the established notions of space and time is even more prominent in Digital Children’s Literature.

Time is more or less defined as ‘natural time...abstract time ... or experiential (phenomenological) time, my time: time as experienced by me-or-anyone, my own here-and-now, my situated being-in-

the-world, me as a real someone someplace sometime now' (Scannell 1996). Space, on the other hand, 'is amorphous and intangible and not an entity that can be directly described and analysed' (Relph 1976). And when the term space arises, 'there is nearly always some associated sense or concept of place' in a way that 'it seems that space provides the context for places but derives its meaning from particular places' (Relph 1976). In this sense, place 'is a concretion of value ... it is an object in which one can dwell', whilst 'space ... is given by the ability to move' (Tuan, 1977). Time and space constitute intrinsically inseparable elements of physical reality. Time engages space and space requires time, as 'we have the sense of space because we can move and of time because, as biological beings, we undergo recurrent phases of tension and ease' (Tuan, 1977). On the one hand, space exists in time, changes through time and it is depicted differently at different temporal points in history, whereas distance often involves time length. On the other hand, the sense and measurement of time are heavily dependent upon space and spatial distances. Consequently, time is associated with the spatial dimensions of the world and vice versa, while these two structural aspects of reality 'coexist, intermesh, and define each other in personal experience' (Tuan, 1977). Space becomes place when it acquires symbolic meaning and a concrete definition, marking the whole spectrum of identity and sense of belonging. The experience of time and space are central to Giddens' notion of 'time-space distanciation', namely the process of a separation of time from space. This notion stems from, on the one hand, Giddens' (1973) sociological criticism of Marx's argument that 'even spatial distance reduces itself to time' and, on the other hand, the significant influence on Giddens by McLuhan's problematic concept of the 'global village' and its teleological doctrine that technological advancement allows people to interact with each other as in face-to-face interactions. Giddens (1990) argues that technological evolution has driven a universalisation and liberalisation of time and space, which he considers prerequisites for globalisation in an age of postmodernity. He argues that globalising dimensions of interactions create 'stretched' relationships between 'local' and 'distant' media forms, with 'local happenings' being, for instance, 'shaped by events occurred many miles away and vice versa'.

In accordance with Giddens, Harvey (1990) identifies postmodern conceptions of space and time as the historical starting point of his theorisation. However, differentiating himself from Giddens' idea of a separation of time from space, Harvey formulates the notion of 'time-space compression'. He uses the notions of universalisation and liberalisation of space and time differently from Giddens, arguing that universalisation and liberalisation allowed time to annihilate space. In this sense, what takes place, according to Harvey, is a shortening of time and shrinking of space, so that time has the potential to diminish the constraints of space and vice versa. Harvey understands time-space compression as a chain of changes concerning an increasing rapidity of time and a decrease in

physical distances in an age of post-modernity. All these notions can be seen under the umbrella of mediation.

Mediation can be viewed as a function and attribute of electronic media and communications. It can also be used to describe media representations of phenomena that take place in 'distant' time and space, and the ways in which such representations may give life to new phenomena (e.g. 'distant suffering') and lead to public action towards and engagement with distant others (Chouliaraki, 2008).

The notion of 'mediation' is also contained in debates on 'mediatisation'. Mediatisation has been seen as a social process (Hjarvard, 2005) that should be approached from an institutional perspective (Hjarvard, 2006). Mediatisation goes beyond the function of mediation and representation and allows us to disentangle more directly the effects of media on society and culture: 'the media will be doing something more than simply reporting or "mediating" them; they will be performatively enacting them, that is, "doing something" over and above reporting or representing ... "mediatising" them in a subjunctive mode'. More specifically, Schulz (2004) argues that there are three functions of media in communications that describe the notion of 'mediatisation': the 'relay function' by which the media transmit messages and services over geographic and temporal boundaries; the semiotic function that encodes and formats messages of human communication; and the economic function through which mediated products constitute part of the mass production processes of today. The 'relay function' is what one can understand as 'mediation', while the other two functions complement 'mediation' and extend the impact of media on various aspects of human communication and social life. It is through the almost instant transfer of messages and services across geographical boundaries and through different time zones or in different time slots, that media bridge spatial, temporal, as well as cultural distances, often creating new spaces (e.g. online forums) and new measures of time (e.g. Twitter and 'real time').

More recent work on mobile technologies (Link & Campbell, 2009) argues about a 'reconstruction of space and time', as mobile technologies influence time and space in many realms of social life, such as the transformation of public into private space and vice versa, the blurring of lines demarcating work and personal life, and new patterns of coordination and social networks. Here it is argued that spatial distances are less important due to the personalised nature of communications across geographic regions developed through mobile technologies.

All these notions create a somewhat complex and quite controversial picture of how different media technologies influence, negotiate and define understandings of time and space in different modes and in diverse contexts.

Synergy

The concept of space as a defined place, forms an important point of reference in this discussion, as both myths and literary or imaginative spaces relate to cultural texts and contexts that in turn relate to a specific time and place. (Wenzel 2006). As Bakhtin argues, there is “a category concerning the form and content of literature» (Bakhtin 2001). This category of literature mainly concerns the time and space relationship, that is, *chronos* and *topos*...the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature (Bakhtin 1981) and “...where the connotations of space manifest themselves in space, in which time gives a sense and a measure” (Platone 2001: xvii)

Thus, in Digital Literature the written, handheld book becomes a digital copy with images and sounds or a virtual world with narration and dialogues in simultaneity with the action, where the reader-player becomes the hero (or the villain etc.) and creates his own storyline. Light is shed on the transcendent power of the imagination represented by literature and novels, while novels represent the development of fictional characters in time and space in a quite creative way. More analytically, in plain narrative, there is a precise time and a precise space as it is defined by the author. A new dimensionality is introduced with the appearance of the reader, where there is an added defined time and space, this time though defined by the reader. Digital Literature comes forward to add a multidimensional level in this relationship, as now there are multiple undefined times and spaces, related to the instances that a “user” creates. This leads to the creation of stories with multiple paths, stories enhanced with images, sounds, videos, and promptly with touch and smell, stories evolving through different perspectives, stories with the possibility of time and space changes, stories that are created at the moment of “playing” or “reading” by multiple “readers – net surfers” based on a core thread of plot, stories that may have different user -created characters and stories that are different every time they are implemented.

All the aforementioned possibilities have a direct and indirect impact on children as there are attitudinal, linguistic, cultural and intercultural, social and moral as well as cognitive and creative connotations for children who engage in digital literature endeavours.

Discussion

This altered space leaves a fertile ground for authors to create literary worlds that can use this flexible and ever-changing notion of time and space into the construction of their narrative or into the narratives themselves. The multilayered, nonlinear, nonsequential, graphic, interactive nature of digital literature and especially children’s literature can radically transform the way literature is seen in general, making the reader –player an active part of literary comprehension, criticism and creation and changing his notion of *chronotopy*, of space and time into a multidimensional frame of seeing

things. This transformation can be already identified into Children's Literature, where Digital Spaces gain ground.

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