

Minds in the New Media Ecology

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Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media

David Ciccoricco

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With *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media*, David Ciccoricco has taken the next step in the study of the connections between story and mind. Ciccoricco has brought relevant new findings in cognitive science to readings of narratives, which he no longer restricts to print texts. As he states in his introduction, “this book is about aesthetic treatments of cognition in three kinds of narrative media: print novels, digital fiction, and story-driven video games” (5). He suggests these new forms require narratologists to extend their notions of narrative’s capabilities in terms of the evocation and simulation of mind, not just when it comes to characterization, but also with reference to its effects on readers and players. The combination of narratology and cognitive studies envisaged by Ciccoricco, stands at the crossing of the narrative text (print, digital or game) and its cognitive processing. He presents this blend by dividing his book in two parts. The first one focuses on attention and perception, both in the text and its processing, the second one deals with memory and emotion, again from the same double perspective. In each part Ciccoricco discusses a print novel, an example of digital fiction and a video game. So, there are six analyses divided over two parts.

The title of the book is indicative of the double approach (cognitive and narratological) and the double focus (text and processing). On the most general level, the refiguring refers to the mapping of the brain as it can be found in cognitive studies (e.g. “brain imaging”; 20) and in recent narratology that studies the representation of mind. On a more concrete level, the ‘figuring’ of the title refers both to the character as a fundamental factor in narrative media and to the figure of the reader/player as the central role in the processing of the narrative. The ‘re’ in ‘refiguring’ suggests the endless transformations and interactions which go on in that processing – and in the contact between the different narrative forms (e.g. text and visuals in a game). Additionally, the title refers to one central aspect of cognitive processing—the distinction between figure and ground. In a telling remark between brackets, Ciccoricco states: “We might speak of this book itself, for example, as treating the mind as a figure against the ground of literary narrative or, for that matter, the idea of literary narrative as the figure against the ground of various media” (97).

As Ciccoricco confidently puts it in his coda, “print novels certainly remain the privileged form. But I have shown that they need not be, as multimodal, kinetic, and ludic texts contribute to the crucial human endeavor of expressing and understanding the perambulation and operation of our minds” (238). Time, in other words, for electronic fiction and video games to be finally taken seriously when the “representations of cognition and

consciousness” (238) come under scrutiny. Ciccoricco acknowledges that quite a bit of interesting work has already been undertaken in this direction (in narratology notably by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon; for an excellent introduction to all the relevant research, also on hypertext fiction, see Neitzel). In fact, at the latest since David Herman’s collection *Narratologies* (1999), narrative studies have consistently taken the path of innovation. Nevertheless, as Ciccoricco’s argument nicely centers on the core psychological processes of attention, perception, memory, and emotion, it definitely pushes the boundaries and invites narratologists to integrate “the new media ecology” (Punday) into their work even more so than they already do. (Speaking of media, by the way, Ciccoricco explicitly forgoes the possibility to include movies in his corpus, since he wants to focus on the “interactive, participatory, and ludic qualities of creative media” (10).)

At the outset of his book, Ciccoricco offers an axiom that will sound familiar by now and that guides his research: “Contemporary literary studies can and should be informed by contemporary sciences of the mind” (15). This leads to two claims. One: the use of cognitive science in literary criticism can lead to innovative readings of narrative texts, and it can also help to investigate the effects of texts on their users and vice versa. Two: cognitive science will help literary studies to transcend the burden of Freudianism. While Ciccoricco does illustrate the latter claim (by bringing in recent research on the unconscious in his interpretation of Patrick White’s *The Solid Mandala* (1966), and by valorizing post-Freudian work on repression in his reading of the digital fiction *Nightingale’s Playground* (2010) by Andy Campbell and Judy Alston), his argument does not play out as (yet another) refutation of Freud. Instead it brings in specific cognitive research where necessary or possible in an effort to sustain the first claim. The value of Ciccoricco’s overall suggestion about the narrative sophistication of digital fiction and video games thus comes to depend on the interest he manages to raise by attracting psychological materials for his readings. In general, he is convincing when he claims that digital media definitely “push the project of cognitive literary and narrative theory into new (kinetic, cybernetic, ludic) territory” (21), and he is clearly on top of this development, e.g. when he writes on the relationship between representation and simulation as it comes to the fore through the move from page to screen (21-29). But on the particular level of the actual interpretations, some of Ciccoricco’s readings are in fact stronger than others, as we will now make clear.

In his reading of *The Solid Mandala*, a novel about the mental life of fraternal twins, Ciccoricco convincingly shows that criticism on this novel by White is “fixated, so to speak, on [Jungian readings]” (34), and he eventually offers the notion of the ‘adaptive unconscious’ (Wilson) in order to overcome this limitation. Starting from attribution theory (part of Theory of Mind), Ciccoricco explains that Waldo, one of the twins, completely misresponds to his brother. Arthur is not the slower near-autistic person Waldo imagines him to be, since he “has a highly developed theory of mind, whereas those with autism disorders are thought to suffer from a deficiency with regard to this—now largely believed to be innate—ability” (51). Ciccoricco is aware that “diagnosing” (48) disturbed fictional characters with the help of real-world psychological theory may miss the point of an engagement with a literary text, but he defends the undertaking by underlining the extension and depth of fictional minds, which from the point of view of psychology often makes them more interesting compared to actual people. Whatever your own position here, the fact is that Ciccoricco elicits new meaning from the novel through this controversial approach. Waldo is ultimately troubled by his failure to read himself correctly. Translated into Timothy Wilson’s terms, he “constructs a self-narrative that corresponds rather poorly to his nonconscious dispositions and abilities” (59), a statement Ciccoricco is able

to prove through a detailed analysis of Waldo's behavior and outward appearance as described in the novel. In a final section, he teases out various ways in which the reader needs to be attentive to the focalization in order to grasp Waldo's problem.

Given the potential complexity of a conventional reading experience, which can also quite easily be described in terms of a network or a feedback loop, digital fiction does not necessarily have to "disrupt" (72) traditional practice, but its technological form of interaction obviously affects the possibilities during the act of reading. In a theoretical prelude to his second chapter, Ciccoricco considers aspects of the narratological toolkit. Manfred Jahn's findings on focalization lead to the conclusion that digital fiction "requires that we consider the reader's role in manipulating the windows of digital textuality and the significance of these interventions for the perspectives framed by the narrative discourse" (75). Following up on Seymour Chatman's proposal of a 'cinematic narrator,' Ciccoricco "attribute[s] the operational output of digital narratives to a cybernetic narrator or to a process of cybernetic narration" (77).

The case study in chapter two, "The Last Day of Betty Nkomo" (2005), a digital fiction by the artist collective Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, supposedly "exploits the digital environment for rich representations of consciousness" (72). A sequence of about 150 screens "flash[ing] by the reader" (82) in rapid succession, the complete text could be recuperated as a short "homodiegetic (...) narration in the present tense, where the here and now of experiencing and telling merge to form a kind of interior monologue" (83-4), but vocal syncopation in the soundtrack provides moments of heterodiegetic input, calling for a "counterpoint reading" (86) in order to do justice to the text. In an effort to raise the stakes of his interpretation, Ciccoricco compares the speed of the cybernetic narrator with the Rapid Serial Visual Presentation technologies used in experimental psychology, zooming in on the "'attentional blink,' (...) preventing the recognition of a second target" (90) if it is offered in less than one hundred to five hundred milliseconds. So "The Last Day of Betty Nkomo" definitely requires a different kind of attention from our conventional reading practice, but is this difference really so spectacular that it calls for major adjustments to post-classical narratological theories about the effects of stories on the minds of readers? And wouldn't this chapter require empirical testing in order to avoid categorical statements about the variance between print and digital when it comes to reading?

Ciccoricco begins the analysis of his first videogame, *Journey* (2012), with yet another promotional statement that seems to beg the question: "Compared to the narrative media of print and digital fiction, contemporary video games tend to place heavier demands on the attentional and perceptual resources of their audience" (93). Doesn't the activity of the reader/player to a certain extent depend on the willingness to become engaged? If readers of print fiction are devoted, and players of video games are more or less lazy, print fiction might turn out to hold a lot in store that video games don't. Sure enough, in video games "cognitive play merges with the corporeal play of an embodied player via their surrogate player-character" (95), and *Journey*, which centers on a non-human agent trying to reach the mountain in the distance in the opening screen, lets Ciccoricco productively extend the figure-ground distinction already applied to the processing of literary texts (Stockwell). Yet the strength of his fine interpretation ultimately relies on his use of the conceptual metaphor "Life is a Journey" (Lakoff and Johnson), which could just as well be valorized in the case of various print texts, beginning with Homer's *Odyssey*.

Turning his attention to *The Mezzanine* by Baker, Ciccoricco applies Gerald Edelman's findings on memory

to its narrator, Howie, whose one-hour lunchbreak constitutes the plot of the novel: “Throughout his account, Howie is effectively confronting the same set of questions as the renowned neuroscientist” (132). This turns *The Mezzanine* into a “reflexive exploration of memory” (134), with (the disruption of) symmetry, one of Edelman’s concerns, initially taking center stage. Not only do Howie’s shoelaces break almost simultaneously after two years of use, the longest footnote of the novel “marks the symmetrical fold of the book itself” and it ends up breaking its “fragile narratological symmetry achieved by the oscillation of ‘I’ and ‘you’” (137). Furthermore, thanks to Howie’s “mindfulness” (e.g. 140), *The Mezzanine* incessantly illustrates our procedural memory (e.g. for riding a bike or tying shoelaces). While the parallels between Edelman and Baker are remarkable, it is Ciccoricco’s investigation of the novel’s nostalgia that gives this interpretation the same kind of luster as his reading of *The Solid Mandala*. A “psychological resource that functions in the preservation of what we call social homeostasis” (149), Howie’s nostalgia maintains his “self-continuity,” but he himself treats it “with great suspicion” (151). In his final section of the Baker chapter, Ciccoricco projects Dorrit Cohn’s notion of consonance onto the reader and suggests that e.g. the novel’s footnotes “enact a consonant form of cognitive activity” (156) in the book’s audience.

Nightingale’s Playground is a complicated multimedial fiction mystery, in which the protagonist, Carl Robertson, needs to confront “the likelihood that his problematic memories [relating to his childhood friend Alex Nightingale] are false” (162). Building on a review by Edward Picot, Ciccoricco teases out the text’s “pronounced indeterminacies” (171), only to recuperate them through an alternative for the Freudian notion of repression. Carl ultimately appears to suffer from “psychogenic or dissociative amnesia” (175), but Ciccoricco is careful to underline that this does not “demystify” *Nightingale’s Playground*. Instead it is supposed to “avoid foreclosing [the] mystery with an equally mysterious explanation of cognitive function” (176), which is obviously not directly related to the digital nature of the text. However, the digital environment does lend itself to a meditation on the phenomenon of memory: “The dark, three-dimensional interiors of part 2 [in which Carl revisits the house where he lived] are at once a highly stylized and subjectively filtered representation of Carl’s physical exploration and what resembles—and acts like—a digitally mediated memory palace to the reader” (183). The graphics and soundtrack of *Nightingale’s Playground* are definitely aesthetically enticing, and yet Ciccoricco’s interpretation derives its import rather from contemporary psychology than from its insistence on the digital dimension of this fiction.

In his final effort to plead for the relevance of non-print narrative in the evocation of mind, Ciccoricco turns to a slasher game with a twist, *God of War* (2005), in which the ruthless Spartan commander Kratos finds time to write his journal. The temporal structure of the game is complex, with “seven flashbacks, one culminating series of flashforwards (...), and one pivotal narrative recursion” (200), all of them offered through gameplay rewards in the form of so-called ‘cutscenes’ (non-interactive sequences that interrupt the play), and held together by an authorial narrator in the form of a voice-over. The flashbacks “are framed as representations of Kratos’ troubled psychological state” (200), but when it comes to creating “a cognitive paradigm of [Kratos as a] literary character,” this backstory proves to be less important than a “somatic union of player and player-character” (208). However, this is where a paradox may arise, since the creation of empathy on the part of a player may undermine his or her ability to fuse with the player-character. Ciccoricco decides to see through the slasher framework and comes up with a variety of strategies (including interaction with other player-characters) that build Kratos as an agent who is more than the set of blades attached to chains fixed to his

forearms. Even in the case of such an extreme character, the player's experience of him will also be determined by the schemas and scripts activated by the game, and it is here that Kratos's capacity as a writer may go hand in hand with his obligation to solve 'action puzzles' before he can go on dicing up his opponents. The typical script of the violent Spartan commander thus becomes untenable. In Ciccoricco's words, "Kratos negotiates not only a physical landscape but also—through traumatic visions, interlevel communing with sympathetic gods such as Athena, and entirely literate journal entries—a mental one" (219).

All in all, *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media* offers an interesting contribution to the rapidly developing fields of cognitive and intermedial narratology. On the down side, the book does not offer an integrated approach or an overarching conceptual toolkit. Every case study pretty much follows its own path and introduces its own concepts, which rarely if ever resurface in other analyses. For instance, in chapter 1 there is a short exposé on "adaptive unconscious" (57); chapter 2 has an equally short review of different types of attention such as "sustain" and "encode" (70-71); and chapter 3 fleetingly deals with the "tend-and-befriend" instinct that incites humans under stress "to nurture and cultivate their social bonds" (113). The link Ciccoricco installs between narrative texts (in whatever form) and cognitive studies is often based on a comparison: the narrative makes the narratologist think of a theory, which is then applied as if it were actually informing the narrative. For instance, "a similar image" (127) used by the author Nicholson Baker and the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio suffices to use the theory to interpret the narrative. In so doing, the analyses run the risk of turning the narrative into an illustration of cognitive theory. This indeed happens time and again, for instance when "the Blades of Chaos" in *God of War* are said to "deliver an unambiguous example of [game theorist Alexander] Galloway's 'unvarnished exertion of affective force'" (219). But on the plus side, Ciccoricco offers analyses that are never less than interesting, he points the way to a vast collection of interesting primary and secondary literature, and he is an enthusiastic advocate of new and challenging narratological developments.

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Herman and Vervaeck have coauthored various articles and books on narratology, such as the well-known and widely used *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (U Nebraska Press, 2005; revised version to be published very soon).