Interactive Fiction and the Role of the New Critical Reader

Dr. Mega Afaf

University of Eloued. Algeria

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601371

Received : 06 July 2026 ; Accepted : 11 July 2026 ; Published : 21 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the shifting paradigm of literary consumption within digital mediums through a theoretical investigation into interactive fiction (IF) and the evolving role of the contemporary reader. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study first establishes the fundamental nature of interactive fiction, examining how its digital, multi-linear architecture distinguishes it from traditional, static texts. Building upon this structural foundation, the paper redefines the reader-player as a "New Critical Reader", a proactive co-author whose interpretive engagement is hardcoded into the narrative itself. A central finding of this study reveals that unlike traditional reading practices, the reader of interactive fiction must systematically traverse all designed narrative paths to fully synthesize the author's overarching thematic message. The paper concludes by positioning this framework as a necessary theoretical paradigm shift in reader-response theory, paving the way for future empirical research that will apply these manifestations to a specific case study within the interactive fiction canon.

Keywords: Interactive Fiction, Reader-Response Theory, Digital Narratology, Co-authorship, Multi-linear Narrative, New Critical Reader.

INTRODUCTION

Interactive fiction (hereafter IF) has fundamentaly revolutionized both traditional literary theory and criticism forcing scholars to expand beyond static analysis. It bridges the gap between literary studies and software. In traditional literature, a critic analyzes a fixed, unchanging text. In interactive fiction, the critic's role changes radically because he must evaluate a work that changes based on his own input. Therefore, in IF, the new critical reader cannot remain a passive judge of a static text. He must act as mirror of multiple realities, balancing immersion with structural analysis to evaluate both the actual experienced text and the author's design. This research paper aims to contribute to the discussion about the new role of the critical reader within IF. Through a qualitative research methodology, I start by displaying the most various recent studies going on different aspects within IF. After that, it is important to probe into the nature of this media before highlighting the new role of the critical reader.

The displayed recent researches in IF are chronological rather than thematical. The aim is to demonstrate that exploring IF is wide and is discussed from different angles. In *"Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction"* (originally drafted in 2002 and revised through 2007), media theorist Nick Montfort establishes a rigorous, methodology-driven framework for analyzing interactive fiction (IF). Rather than relying on casual terminology or unmapped adaptations of film and game studies, Montfort uses narratology (the structural study of narrative) to separate and define the unique technical, ludic, and textual elements of the medium. Montfort argues that a rigorous, narratological evaluation of IF allows theorists and developers to look past a game's underlying code or programming data structures. By treating the application as a functional "black box" that handles input and output, scholars can clearly understand the complex intersections of simulation, storytelling, and rule systems that define interactive literature.

In this highly influential article *"From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative"*(2009), prominent narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan (2009) investigates the design and theoretical

hurdles of merging active user participation with structured storytelling. The article supplies a rigorous typology and vocabulary designed explicitly for a poetics of interactive digital media. Focusing more on the reader-player. In the conference paper "*Interactive Fiction: Narrative and immersive experience in text-based games"*, Sónia Rafael (2018) explores how text-based interactive fiction (IF) generates deep immersion without the use of modern graphical interfaces. Rafael investigates how the combination of computational mechanics and reader imagination creates an evocative, space-centric experience. In the same vein, Lee Feldman's thesis *"Player-Response: On the Nature of Interactive Narratives as Literature"* (2018) utilizes Reader-Response Criticism to argue for the inclusion of narrative-based video games into the realm of serious literature. Feldman actively challenges traditionalist critics, specifically game theorist Ian Bogost, who argues that games should strictly focus on mechanics rather than narrative, by illustrating how the unique interplay of player agency, hypertextuality, and non-linear storytelling represents the next major evolution in narrative techniques. Rather than rendering the player a passive spectator, narrative games require direct, interactive manipulation to construct a text's ultimate meaning.

From a deeper perspective, in the paper *"Truth in Interactive Fiction"* (2022), philosopher Alex Fisher provides a comprehensive account of how fictional truths are established in interactive media (such as videogames, interactive films, and Choose Your Own Adventure novels) where the audience's choices dynamically shape the narrative. Fisher concludes that neither the actual work nor the implied work individually encapsulates the full fictional reality of an interactive fiction. Instead, a dual account is necessary. His framework mirrors how we aesthetically judge art: it allows critics and audiences to evaluate a work by separating how it *actually is* from how it *was intended to be*. In the paper *"Beyond the Reader, Towards the Player: Reconceptualizing the Reader-Response Theory through Video-Games,"* (2022) Benharrousse, by examining video games, proposes a reconceptualization where the game acts as the text and the player acts as an active constituent who directly constructs and experiences the narrative through interaction. In other wrods, Through digital media, the reader transcends their traditional passive role to become an essential component in creating and shaping the text itself. His study views the player as an extension of the traditional reader, it naturally follows that the video game itself must be treated as the literary text.

Noah Hansen's Master of Arts thesis, *"A Reader Response Approach to Storytelling and Tabletop Games: The Player's Experience of Dungeons and Dragons and Its Pedagogical Applications"* (2023), explores the collaborative storytelling dynamics of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), specifically *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). By applying Reader-Response Theory pioneered by Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, Hansen investigates how players emotionally engage with, actively construct, and interactively experience narratives. Furthermore, the paper synthesizes these findings to argue for the inclusion of D&D as a legitimate literary tool and pedagogical device within academic environments. In relation to this, Tyler B. Wright (2024) advocates for integrating interactive fiction (IF) game development into humanities education, specifically as a pedagogical tool for teaching classic literature and the "Great Books" canon. His article provides excellent modern support for how literature, humanities, education, and software development intersect.

Furthermore, Hansen (2024) argues that tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) dismantle traditional narrative hierarchies, shifting the player from a passive text-interpreter into an active, collaborative author. Because players operate in an "aesthetic reading mode," they merge their real-world lived experiences with the virtual world, viewing the campaign's events not as detached fiction, but as lived autobiographical experiences. Finally, I end this literature review with Rawya Belgueliel (2024) who explores the landscape of digital interactive literature, highlighting its evolution within contemporary scholarship and its pioneering role in Arabic literature. In her article, she investigates the challenges of defining this new field, its intersection with Western reception theory, and the fluid boundaries of genres in electronic spaces.

The Nature of Interactive Fiction

Introduction

The genre sets the rules of the game and the reader plays the game based on those rules. In other words, in interactive fiction, the genre tells the reader what actions are even possible. The reader has to understand the genre just to figure out what commands to type or choices to make. If the genre is a Text Adventure/Parser game (e.g., *Zork*): The reader adopts the role of a physical explorer. The "genre rules" dictate that they must use spatial verbs (GO NORTH, TAKE LAMP, LOOK UNDER RUG). Whereas, if the genre is a Choice-Based Narrative (e.g., *Twine* games): The reader acts more like a director or a psychological agent. The genre rules limit them to thematic decisions, often focusing on dialogue or moral dilemmas rather than mapping a physical room.

Belgueliel (2024) points out that because digital literature exists at the age of technology and art, phrases like ‘electronic literature’, ‘digital text’, ‘hypermedia literature’ and ‘interactive literature’ are frequently used interchangeably. According to her, digital interactive literature is a distinct genre that relies fundamentaly on electronic medium for its authorship, structure and consumption. And thus, it cannot exist outside its technological subsrate. The code, hyperlinks, multimedia assets and electronic interfaces are embedded directly in the narratives DNA. In addition, Montfort (2013) establishes that text-based interactive fiction is formally an interactive computer program. To understand how it operates, one must look below the textual surface at two core technical components : 1) the parser which is the software component responsible to natural language understanding. It processes the text strings typed by the interactor (eg, commanding a character to ‘open the gate’) ; 2) the world model which is the simulation mechanism that tracks the virtual environment, including ‘rooms’ (connected in a graph layout), objects, non-player characters (NPCs), and their underlying behaviours generated by the simulation of the player character within the environment.

We know that traditional novel has one sequense of events, even if it contains flashbacks or multiple narrators. On the other hand, IF often includes branching paths, multiple endings, optional scenes and different character development. Related to IF, Fisher (2022) divides propositions into two main categories based on model logic concepts, namely, work-truths and branch-truths. By work-truths, he means the propositions that are fixed, unaltered elements of the IF and remain through across every possible playthrough (eg, that a character possesses a certain identity from the beginning). While branch-truths are propositions that are only truths in specific playthroughs, or paths (branches) depending on the audience’s choices (eg, a specific narrative ending). The branching networks in IF allow different routes in the story. These branchings make the replay of the events when players make different choices and discover alternative scenes, endings or character arcs. Thus, the author of IF designs a space of possibilites where the player determines which path through these possibilites is experienced ; a process called co-authorship, though the author sets the limits of what can happen.

Feldman (2018) argues that interactive digital narratives (such as text adventures, visual novels, and role playing video games) should be classified and studied as literature. However, traditional textual analysis is insufficient because it treats the text as fixed. Concerning the acualization of the text, Feldman, drawing on Wolfgang Iser, notes that a print book has ‘gaps’ or ‘indeterminacies’ that a reader must mentally fill in to create meaning. In an interactive narrative, these gaps are not just cognitive, they are structural. Therefore, contrary to traditional narratives, in IF, the reader possesses agency, the ability to make meaningful choices that affect events and outcomes. The reader makes efforts, solves puzzles or navigates the story.

As a matter of fact, Rafael (2018) states that the author of IF is not just writing a sequence of events, he is architecting a spacial simulation that the reader must navigate geometrically. In text based genres, the narrative world is structured as a network of nodes or ‘rooms’ connected via geographical coordinates (North, South, East, West). Because there are no graphics, the text acts as a sensory trigger. The player is forced to cognitively construct the layout of the world. This is why early IF players frequently hand-drew maps on paper to track their progress. The physical act of mapping was a direct extension of reading. In this regard, Belgueliel (2024) refers to this agency as the ‘active recipent’. In digital interactive literature, the recipient shifts from a passive consumer to an active producer or co-author. The digital text poses an inherent dynamism that demands phyisical input (clicking links, manipulating pathways) to unfol. In this context, she introduces Hans Robert Jauss’s concept of the ‘Horizon of expectations’ (the cultural and literary criteria a reader brings to a text) which is dramatically disrupted by digital formats. The reader must navigate not only linguistic expectations but also structural and

computational ones. If the reader does not understand the electronic system's interface, the literary experience breaks down. Another feature discussed by Belgueliel is how digital spaces act as melting plot where rigid genre classifications breakdown , a phenomeneon referred to as the intersection or overlap of literary genres. Digital interactive literature fluidly combines prose, poetry, cinematic visual arts, auditory sound spaces, and procedural programmic logic. A single digital piece might function simultaneously as an epistolary novel, a piece of kinetic poetry and a choice-driven game simulation.

Montfort (2002) also extroplates the nature of IF as being : « a text-accepting, text-generating computer program ; a potential narrative that is a system that produces narrative during interaction ; a simulation of an environment or world ; and a structure of rules within which an outcome is sought, also known as a game » (p.26-27). In her part, Rafael (2018) highlights the cybernetic nature of the medium by pointing out its cyclical interface structure referring to it as 'The Loop' : 1) system output : The game displays textual data describing a situation, room or event ; 2) User Input where the player evaluates the text, forms a cognitive strategy and inputs a text command ; 3) Internal Processing where the parser reads the string, checks it against the world model's rules and updates the game state. ; and 4) System Response where the machine outputs the new textual reality, restoring the cycle.

The Role of the New Critical Reader in IF

Introduction

The critical reader is the reader who does not just play to experience the story or game, but also evaluates its stucture, mechanics and thematic coherence. So, in IF, critical reading requires a dual cognitive state where the reader must balance immersion with evaluation to mapp out the implied meaning of the work and its artistic success. Interactive fiction represents the ultimate evolution of reader-response theory in electronic literature, as the narrative refuses to unfold without one's active engagement. By using 'Twine' (hypertext) or inform 7 (parser-based), authors build texts that demand structural completion by the user. In this framework, reading effectively becomes a performative event.

Aarseth (1997) states that the concept of cybertext highlights the mechanical structure of a text, treating the medium's specific mechanics as a core component of the literary experience. Consequently, it places the consumer, or user, in a much more active role than even traditional reader-response theories suggest. While a standard reader's engagement happens entirely within their own mind, a cybertext user interacts in an extranoematic (beyond the mind) way. Throughout this process, the user physically shapes a sequence of signs, engaging in a literal construction of the text that traditional definitions of "reading" fail to capture. This phenomenon is defined as ergodic, a term borrowed from physics and rooted in the Greek words *ergon* ("work") and *hodos* ("path"). In ergodic literature, the user must expend non-trivial effort to navigate the text. For this concept to be meaningful, its opposite must also exist: nonergodic literature. In nonergodic texts, navigating the material requires only trivial effort, demanding no physical responsibilities from the reader beyond basic eye movement or the routine turning of pages. With these new forms of digital literature, reader response theory expands into player response theory as in this master's thesis *"Player-Response: On the Nature of Interactive Narratives as Literature"*(2018) where Lee Feldman bridges traditional print-based literary criticism with contemporary digital media. Feldman proposes an updated critical lens called Player-Response Theory, adapted directly from the 20th-century school of Reader-Response Criticism (associated with theorists like Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish).

Rafael (2018) establishes a clear framwork for defining interactivity in digital spaces by synthesizing foundational theories such as those by Aarseth and Juul. She breaks interactivity down into two main formats that would have implications on the role of the critical reader, namely, the explicit interactivity and implicit (cognitive) interactivity. By explicit interactivity, she means the tangible, physical actions a user takes to interact with the system, such as typing command lines, choosing options or solving a physical task While implicit (cognitive) interaction refers to the internal mental processes of interpretation, anticipation and imagination that

a reader experiences when digesting any narrative. In this regard, Rafael's paper points to active imagination . She extrapolates that graphical games show the user exactly what a world looks like which sometimes limit personal imagination. Text-based IF, however, provides a descriptive skeletal frame. The user's brain fills in the visual gaps, generating highly personalized vivid and emotionally resonant mental imagery. In this regard, she distinguishes between absorptive and imperative states. In absobtive state, the player reads and processes prose, and an interpreter state decides, commands, and acts. This constant psychological oscillation keeps the player tightly locked into the experience, preventing passive distraction.

Feldmen (2018) also considers the player as co-author : the text remains a collection of latent computer code until a player acts it. By making choices, navigating physical space, and triggering algorithmic events, the player actively actualizes the text into a concrete narratice experience. Meaning is born strictly in the interaction between the system's rules and the player's subjectivity. Additionally, in Feldman's view, there is a categorization of choices based on their depth and impact on the reader-player's psychology. The first is cosmetic choice ; they are options that provide an illusion of control but do not alter the macro-narrative (eg. Choosing whether a character says a line angrily or calmly, or deciding the color of an outfit). While linguistically distinct, these choices ultimately funnel back into the same predefined narrative path. The second choice is called the meaningful choice in which desicions that create branching narrative pathways, permanently locking out certain plot lines or character relationships while opening up others. These choices carry moral, systematic and structural weight, forcing the player to take ethical responsibility for the narrative outcome.

One of the principle actions by the new critical reader is immersion. Ryan (2009) elaborates comprehensively on this notion and identifies four sub-types of narrative immersion that interact uniquely with digital controls :

1) Spacial immersion : the kinetic, embodied pleasure of navigating through smoothly rendered virtual landscapes. This explains why the 'epic quest' archtypal structure is heavily favored by game designers.

2) Epistemic Immersion : the intense desire to unlock hidden knowledge. This is highly compatible with interactivity, as the player can actively step into the shoes of a detective, gathering physical clues or interrogating characters to unpack an unchangeable backstory.

3) Temporal Immersion : the experience of curiosity, surprise and suspense. Ryan notes that suspense is highly resitant to interactivity. Suspence requires top-down management of probability where a reader fears a future outcome ; if a player has the agency to change that outcome through their actions, true narrative suspense is often lost.

4) Emotional Immersion : Feeling genuine empathy for computer-controlled actors. This is the most difficult dimension to achieve because the self-centered, performance-driven goals of winning a game frequently reduce characters to mere instruments of obstacles, rather than complete beings capable of generating deep emotional resonance.

In the light of what has been presented so far, traditional reader-response theory like those of Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco change when the reader's physical choices determine the text's actualized sentences. In Eco's perception of textual interpratation, the text is a lazy machine that is activated only by the reader. He refers to the critical reader as the Model Reader, he is the one who discovers or deciphers the writer's textual strategies and their corresponding functions or meanings. This might be compared to the IF which heavily relies on the cooperation of the reader-player to unfold the paths set by the author. In this regard, Eco speaks about the fictional walks that the reader makes in his interpretation of the literary text while simultaneously constructing his possible worlds about the narrative or its characters. Similarly, I see that the reader-player in IF makes these fictional/playful walks by choosing among the paths and actions set by the author while at the same time these choices are conditioned by many elements : his emotions at that very moment, cognitive background, morality and the possible worlds he has already contructed in the process.

Though Eco advocates the plurality of interpretations of the literary text, his Model Reader is caught between fidelity to the text and freedom of interpretation. Being guided by the author's textual strategies, he is constrained within a path predetermined by the author. This is the same case as in IF, the reader-player might think that he is free with the available choices open to him, but these choices are also limited as they are all thought about and planned by the author beforehand. In this situation, while evaluating, the critical reader might question the number of branchings offered by the author, and more importantly, he has to try these all branchings in order to consctruct a comprehensible evaluation. At the same time, he has to consider the layout of the IF, the sounds, graphics, videos, software mechanics which serve as equivalents of literary devices like metaphor, tone..etc, and of course the primary text which all contribute in the making of the story and the author's vision. Therefore, as in reader-response theory, the reader is a co-creator of meaning of the text (as in Wolgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Umberto Eco), in IF, he is also a co-author.

Having different paths in IF implies different events which lead to different meanings. The critical reader is in front of different events with different meanings. Connected to this, building on Ryan's (2009) categorization of the types of immersion, the critical reader might question which type of immersion activated in each branching, whether it is spacial, epistemic, temporal or emotional. Understanding the type of immersion involved also helps the critical reader in constructing the aim of the autor and evaluate it. Therefore, traditional readers who remain safely passive, the consumer of a cybertext is placed in a vulnerable position where they face the genuine possibility of failure or rejection. Because this medium demands substantial effort and active participation, the act of reading shifts from mere interpretation to direct intervention. Engaging with a cybertext requires a personal, creative commitment that leads either to deep connection or complete frustration. While the experience shares some elements of traditional narrative desire, it introduces a deeper conflict, a battle for ownership of the story itself, driven by the reader's urge to make the text uniquely their own. Even when this feeling of personal agency is just an illusion, the text's ability to manipulate and coerce the participant remains entirely real. (Aarseth (1997)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, interactive fiction (IF) redefines the boundaries of literary engagement by transforming the text from a static narrative into a dynamic, mechanical system. As this paper has demonstrated, cybertextuality shifts the focus from purely mental interpretation to direct, physical intervention. In this digital landscape, the traditional passive reader is replaced by a critical "user" who must navigate ergodic paths, risking narrative failure and rejection in a literal struggle for story control.

In other words, Interactive Fiction (IF) transforms traditional reading from a passive activity into an active partnership, turning the reader into a "New Critical Reader." In this role, audiences are both the protagonist and the co-author, navigating branching paths and making moral, logical, and narrative choices that directly shape the story's outcome.The shift into interactive storytelling challenges the traditional literary framework, demanding a new kind of engagement from the audience:The "Player-Reader" Duality: Because the narrative is traditionally written in the second person (e.g., "You open the door..."), readers must embody the character while simultaneously evaluating the story from a distance, requiring critical thinking and empathy.Active Meaning-Making: Instead of simply consuming a fixed sequence of events, readers physically enact choices. The reader acts as a filter, deciding which risks to take and which leads to follow, directly participating in the narrative's construction.Critical Evaluation of Agency: The reader must actively analyze the type of choice being offered, whether it is an ethical dilemma, an expressive choice, or a "puzzle" that must be solved using logic and close reading of the text.Branching Truths: Unlike linear literature, which contains a single, fixed plot, interactive narratives contain multiple potential fictions based on the paths the reader chooses to take.

This evolution demands a new critical framework, one that recognizes reading not just as an act of internal consumption, but as an extranoematic performance of physical and semiotic construction. By blending mechanical design with personal improvisation, interactive fiction proves that the modern reader is no longer just an interpreter of meaning, but an active collaborator in the text's very survival and shape. Moving forward,

literary criticism must continue to adapt to this shifting power dynamic, acknowledging that in the digital age, the story truly cannot exist without the active intervention of its user.

In the end, the role of the reader in digital age is still open for discussion in this digital age. At present, this is a theoretical attempt to probe into the nature of this new role. I aim to pave the ground for future prospects to investigate practically the role of the reader by choosing a sample from IF and analyse the different processes and the hurdles he might face and how to act upon them.

REFERENCES

1. Belgueliel Rawya (2024). The Digital Interactive Literature: Between Terminological Challenge and Aesthetics of Reception, and the Interplay of Literary Genres. Ennass Journal Volume: 11 / N°: 11 (2024), p 438-450
2. Benharrousse Rachid. (2022). Beyond the reader, towards the player: reconceptualizing the reader-response rheory through video-games. J-Lalite : Journal of English Studies. Vol.3 No.2, December 2022, pp.154-154.
3. Espen J. Aarseth (1997). Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
4. Feldman Lee (2018). Player-Response: On the Nature of Interactive Narratives as Literature. English (MA) Theses. Chapman University,
5. Fisher Alex (2022). Truth in interactive fiction. Synthese (2022) 200:436.
6. Marie Laure-Ryan (2009). From Narrative games to playable stories.Toward a poetics of interactive narrative.Storyworlds, volume 1.
7. Montfort, Nick. (2002). Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction. IF Theory Reader.
8. Montfort, Nick. "Riddle Machines: The History and Nature of Interactive
9. Fiction." A Companion to Digital Literary Studies, edited by Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013, 267-282. © 2013 Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman
10. Rafael Sonia(2018). Interactive fiction. Narrative and immersive experience in text-based games. CONFIA . International conference on ilustration & animation .Esposende. Portugal . July 2018 . ISBN: 978-989-99861-6-9
11. Tyler B. Wright Tyler. B (2024). Interactive fiction as agreat books pedagogy : a game developer's position piece. International journal of humanities, art and social studies (IJHAS). Vol.09. N.1. February 2024.