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Reading Transmedia

Re-contextualising the Written Word in Popular Web-native Genres

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Speakers: Alessio Antonini (Open University), Francesca Benatti (Open University), Sam Brooker (University of Richmond)

Panel abstract

Like electricity leaping from point to point, the power of the written word lies in the connection it creates – however briefly. Gatekeeping historical structures of distribution and publication all but guaranteed the publication of unrepresentative works alone. Webnovels and webcomics represent two genres of mature born-digital textuality that evidences the optimistic vision of web distribution: linking communities, elevating unheard voices, creating new modes and styles of storytelling unfettered by commercial limitations.

Their comparatively lengthy history (at least in web-genre terms) allows us to reflect on their affordances. What are the expectations of authorship and readership in the quintessentially transmedia space of webnovel and webcomic publishing? Absent traditional publishing, do traditional notions of genre and paratext still apply? What is the status of the written word when it experiences such perpetual and destabilising cycle of revision, translation, reconfiguration, remediation? Do they still *count* as “written words”? Or do they instead occupy an intermediate space between *verba volant* and *scripta manent*? What does the comparatively greater success of webcomics compared to webnovels tell us about the power of the written word versus images on the web?

This panel seeks to address each of these areas and beyond. Developing topics first introduced in the SHARP 2021 panel *Transmedia Beyond Definitions*, it will present three case studies that interrogate the characteristics of digital-native media and their affect on the dynamics between readers, authors, and publishers. Given the theme of SHARP 2022, this panel will focus specifically on the empowering effects of web-native genres, e.g., from supporting creative work based upon non-mainstream authors and topics, to how readers take control and adapt, flex and blend reading into their activities, habits and needs.

On Timing of Transmedia Experience: an Ontological Analysis

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Web-based genres configure complex transmedia systems of adaptations, translations and republishing, connecting portals, communities and works. An emblematic example is the

relation between webnovels and webcomics and, therefore, these two communities and the communities within these communities of “synchronic” and “diachronic” readers. Indeed, the fast-paced release of works, which ranges from a chapter a week to several a day, combined with pay-to-read in advance policies and translations of “different quality”, enables multiple practices. For instance, some readers can subscribe and read each new issue as it is released while others read a batch of issues in catching up sessions. Other readers struggle following the pace of a webcomics while others switch to the original webnovel for a faster reading. In general, the transmediality of web-native genres empowers readers in finding a better fitting of reading in their habits and needs. This flexibility and freedom configures a form of experience on its own as readers are provided a much wider choice than with traditional paper and digital media. In this regard, the transmedia space is to be intended as an interactive system, which the user can find his/her way through in the form of scavenging for the time-beating release, google-translated chapters or raws (non-translated comics panels). This contribution will provide a comprehensive overview of the time dimensions of web-native genres discussing different common practices based on temporal decisions of readers. This work is the result of an autoethnographic analysis using the lenses of a researcher of web technologies, interactive media experience and millennial.

Between genre and gender: a pilot study of Webcomics

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The communications circuits of English-language comics have traditionally been resistant to female participation, both for readers and for authors. But print comics are no longer the sole format through which comics can manifest their power as combinations of written words and images. Webcomics are a web-native genre that innovates the roles of authors, readers and publishers in a digital communications circuit (see Benatti 2019 and Antonini, Brooker and Benatti 2020). After the rise of Japanese manga as an international language of comics (Brienza 2016), Korean webcomics platforms are establishing new web-native comics formats.

Among these emerging manifestations of the power of the written word, do such webcomics enable greater participation of female, transgender and non-binary readers and creators? To begin to address this question, this paper will discuss a pilot study focusing on the webcomic platform WEBTOON, which is owned by Korean search engine Naver. WEBTOON is now the largest comics publisher in the world based on number of readers, with 100 billion page views in 2019 (MacDonald, 2020).

I will show the results of an analysis of publicly available data gathered from WEBTOON to assess gender participation and genre subdivision. Because of data protection issues, the paper will use proxy measures such as number of likes, ratings and subscribers across the different publisher-defined genres on WEBTOON (such as Romance, Superhero, Fantasy), as well as WEBTOON’s own rankings of the most popular comics. Additionally, the paper will attempt to quantify the number of female and non-binary authors published on WEBTOON using data from their social media profiles, which are part of a transmedia continuum for both authors and readers. I will then compare these measures with the gender and genre

breakdown of US print comics authors, and correlate them with the different communications circuits of the two media.

The Theatre of Intention: Farrell, intentionalism and the web.

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What is the aim of reading? For some critics, it is to uncover the intended meaning of the author (Hirsch 1967; Knapp and Michaels 1982); for others, to determine your own understanding of the work (Beardsley 1981; Stecker 1997). The latter school tends to position the work as the product of linguistic, literary, or cultural conventions that readers can interpret for themselves. The author becomes an intrusive figure in the court of interpretation, their biography and intention unwelcome distractions from the textual experience. This rejection of reading as a pursuit of authorial intention unifies New Criticism, post-structuralist theory and reader-response criticism, a collection of theorists who otherwise had very different goals.

In 2017 literary theorist John Farrell published *The Varieties of Authorial Intention*, which sought to challenge what he called the textual fallacy – “the notion that the text is meaningful purely on its own”. In a work clearly indebted to Hirsch, Farrell describes both author and reader as “necessary conditions for literature,” continuing: “if there has been any limit upon reading it has been the limit that puts the author’s activity out of bounds.” The three modes of authorial intention Farrell identifies - communicative, artistic, practical – provide a lens to view the relationship between authors and readers engendered by digital and social media, explicitly within webcomics and the webnovel. Performative, transparent, exposing practices like live-streaming the creation process, relentless engagement with fans, and the transparency of systems for patronage reveals the author’s intention at all three levels to an extent impossible in an analogue world. This paper will seek to understand the consequences of this new transparency for the relationship between authors and readers, and the relative power of the written word both within creative work, and in the wider context of digital communication.

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Speaker bios

Dr. Shafquat Towheed (Panel Chair)

Dr Shafquat Towheed is Senior Lecturer in English in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), The Open University. He directs the UK Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945, and the History of Books and Reading (HOBAR) Research Collaboration. He is the UK Principal Investigator for the JPIC/AHRC funded consortium, 'Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool' (READ-IT, 2018-2021) which uses digital tools to investigate the cultural heritage of reading in Europe. He is the author, editor or co-editor of nine books and has researched and written extensively on the history of reading practices. With Professor Jonathan Rose, he is co-editor of Palgrave Macmillan's 'New Directions in Book History' series.

Dr. Francesca Benatti

I am a Research Fellow in Digital Humanities in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at The Open University, where I co-lead the DH_OU Digital Humanities Research Collaboration and the Open-Oxford-Cambridge DTP Digital Humanities training programme.

My digital research interests are digital literary studies, especially stylometry and text analysis. My non-digital research ranges from comic books to book history to nineteenth-century Irish author Thomas Moore.

I am a member of digital humanities projects such as READ-IT, the Reading Experience Database, ERA/RÊVE and the Open Arts Archive.

Recent publications include articles on [webcomics](#) and their [interaction model](#), annotations [as links to be](#) and [modelling the phenomenology of reading](#).

Dr. Sam Brooker

Dr Sam Brooker is Associate Professor in Digital Communication at Richmond, the American International University, London. His research explores the relationship between emerging digital technologies & theories of literature and culture. He has recently published on

hypermedia, intentionalism, and digital media. Recent works include *Mediation as Calibration: A Framework for Evaluating Author/Reader Relations* and *Proposing, disposing, proving: Barthes, intentionalism, and hypertext literary fiction*. He is a member of ARDIN and the ACM, serving on committees for the ACM Hypertext and ICIDS conferences.

Dr. Alessio Antonini

Dr Alessio Antonini is a Research Associate in Web Technologies at the Knowledge Media Institute of The Open University. He is a member of the 'Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool' (READ-IT, 2018-2021) project and active member of the Digital Humanities at The Open University Research Collaboration (DH_OU). His research interests include social ontologies and experiential models for reading, events and social activities. He has recently published several works on reading experience and new media, such as "Understanding the phenomenology of reading through modelling", "All We Do is "Stalking": Studying New Forms of Reading in Social Networks" and "Circuits, Cycles, Configurations: an Interaction Model of Web Comics".