The explosion of digital storytelling. Creator's perspective and creative processes on new narrative forms

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ABSTRACT

Networked digital narratives are developed in a society marked by distrust in meta-narratives, liquidity and tension between Mass Media and New Media. This research aims to delve into these narratives from the creators’ perspective, analyzing new formats, authors and creative processes that are put into practice. For that purpose, the applied methodology combines in-depth interviews with creators with discourse analysis, and arts based research with the technique of the research journal. The results reveal an overflow of the classical conception of narrative, a trend towards convergence, and the dominance of visual and sequential creative thinking over alphabetical-continuous thinking. It also shows a series of clues for the creation of digital narratives: interactivity, hypermedia, transmedia, virtuality and connectivity. Finally, we highlight that creators do not have preestablished guidelines and follow the procedure of trial and error for the construction of their narratives.

1. Introduction

Digital narratives are immersed in a new media environment that maintains a close relationship with the construction and comprehension of contemporary society. The emergence of a new generation of media based on an innovative model founded on the networks and the collaboration of their users “is defying our knowledge on the old mass communication media” (Scolari, 2008). At this time of media disruption, digital storytelling is characterized “by the fact of giving to contents a paced and exciting narrative structure, but especially for the richness and variety of stimuli and content that allow to involve an extremely wide audience” (Clarizia et al., 2018).

This research aims to delve into these narratives, from the creation perspective, analyzing new formats, authors and creative processes that are put into practice by applying a qualitative methodology. For that purpose, the applied methodology combines in-depth interviews with discourse analysis, and arts based research with the technique of the research journal. The intention is to collect a first-hand testimony of the phenomenon.

1.1. Context

A reshaping of identity and collective expression is taking place. Audiovisual and multimedia gain importance over the word in an everyday and globally-connected digital environment, in which “people who have never done so before are telling personal stories through digital forms” (Couldry, 2008). Manovich (2005) highlights the numerical nature (digitalization), the modularity, the automation, the variability and the trans-codification of this media system. The role of code and software, in their hybridization with pre-existing cultural conventions, has taken on a fundamental value. Transformations in the communication processes are especially evident in the changes occurring in the narratives and readings. Martín-Barbero (2008) summarizes them as “a disconcerting architecture of languages – sound, spoken, text, visual, digital-constructed on interfaces between words and images, sounds, colors, volumes, shapes and sometimes rhythms and tones”. For Madianou and Miller (2012), the mediations are expanding. The definition of the narrative act becomes complex. It is both a concurrent and an atomized phenomenon, evolving and mutating continuously, at an accelerated pace.
1.2. Background

1.2.1. Transversal nature of networked digital narratives

Some authors have tried to define and categorize the nature of networked digital formats within this changing environment, focusing on its capacities for interaction and immersion, sequentiality, participation, spatiality and comprehensiveness, as well as the regulation of an invisible code (algorithms) that adds a reactive nature with the environment and an interactive one with the user (Murray, 1999; Ryan, 2004). The bits facilitate its rewriting and modularity. There are multiple sensorial and semiotic channels combined with the capacities of a network connecting machines and people in virtual spaces. Under these dynamics, centrality, margins, hierarchy and linearity as traditional conceptual systems are confronted with multi-linearity, nodes, links and networks: "Intertextuality, Multivocality, Rhizome, Nonlinear model of the Network" (Landow, 2006).

Interactivity and its degrees (Giannetti, 2002; Silva, 2005), hypermedia and the possibility of “branching or performing presentations which respond to user actions, systems of prearranged words and pictures” according to Nelson (2003), transmedia logic (Jenkins, 2003; Scolari, 2013; Pratter, 2011; Dena, 2014), connectivity in a network environment (Siemens, 2006; Castells, 2001) or virtuality (Levy, 1999; Guizzi et al., 2020) offer a metamorphosis, one that is both technological and conceptual, for the narrative phenomenon.

The elements typified by narratology (Genette, 1980) spill over into a new conceptualization of the narrative that transcends circumscription for the representation of events by the narrator. The widespread use of smartphone applications is changing how users and creative professionals represent, experience and share everyday life (Marsha and Schleser, 2014). Space and place are redefined in the ubiquity and co-presence of smartphones. Alongside this, tools such as virtual and augmented reality, pervasive devices and haptic responses with a capacity to improve media experiences through senses in the user's skin (Irrat et al., 2014) make it difficult to characterize networked digital narratives as a comprehensive, generic and encompassing phenomenon.

1.2.2. New formats, new ways of (story)telling

The outburst of stories and the pluralization of interpretations that Martin-Barbero (2008) invokes are now applicable to connected digital creativity. Contemporary storytellers have a whole new set of channels and tools at their disposal. Some of them have already been widely addressed by the international scientific community.

This is the case of the IF (Interactive Fiction), thanks to the work of authors such as Aarseth (2007), Murray (1999), Sloane (1991) or Montfort (2003) who managed to elevate the consideration of an object of influences and appropriations have emerged after the networked digital disruption (Casillo et al., 2016) and Casillo et al. (2016).

For this, and following a qualitative methodology, a series of in-depth filmed interviews were conducted, especially due to this recourse's ability to clarify the subjective human experience (Corbetta, 2007). The interviews focused on the authors’ perspective, their creative work and on their thoughts regarding their own projects. Together with these interviews, and in order to understand the creative perspective, a participatory action-research within the framework of Arts Based Research (ABR) was implemented in a chained articulation (where the results of a technique are used in the application of the next one). The use of ABR fulfills a triple objective.

1. To verify the validity of gathered data during the in-depth interview phase related to creation.

2. Understand the characteristics of different networked digital formats, and define their key features.
3. Understand the creative processes conducted by their creators.

Digital storytelling is being approached from different perspectives in scientific literature. Beyond the conceptualization of the phenomenon in the connected digital world (Lugmayr et al., 2017), we observe a whole pragmatic line of real application of its advantages, as we observed in Castillo et al. (2016) and Castillo et al. (2016).
2. To apply the knowledge acquired in the interviews and create a meta-
reflection from the creation practice.
3. To add a differential perspective that generates new questions and
reflections, providing the study with “very different ways of seeing,
imagining, understanding, articulating, and inquiring, which leads to
better questioning and more robust inquiring practices” (O’Donog-
hue, 2011).

To determine the sample, we followed some basic criteria. Interviews
were conducted with creators that are known for their work as avant-
garde narrators (awards and social impact) in Spain (as shown in Table 1).

### 2.1. Coding and data analysis procedures

The coding and analysis process for the 5 in-depth interviews fol-
lowed the next steps: 1. Transcription. 2. Assignment of categories and
sub-categories. 3. Data input on Atlas.ti. 4. Coding verification and
consolidation in the program based on categorization and revision of
relevance relative to the number of appearances. 5. Highlighting of sig-
nificant phrases and paragraphs. 5. Construction of a conditional-causal
concept map on the basis of the conceptualization. 6. Interpretation
and analysis of the data obtained. Final coding is described on Table 2.

After the consolidation of the coding and the marking of sentences and
paragraphs of interest, the following concept map was constructed
(Figure 1) showing the relations and interactions between key concepts
and highlights obtained.

The next research stage focuses on participatory action-research
within the framework of Arts Based Research. To this end, a digital
platform was created based on the connected digital narrative (meta-
narrative), hosted in the domain www.contadoresdelcaos.com. The
platform was built using Klynt, an interactive storytelling editor that, in
addition to enabling the hypermedia editing of materials, allows the
generation of a conceptual scheme and real-time visualization of the
interactions and relationships between sequences. The interactive hy-
permedia structure obtained at the end of the project is a virtual mirror of
the concept map. Figure 2 shows the structure of the platform through
the Klynt interface.

In order to systematize the creative process research journal was
employed, The journal combines image/video/hypermedia with textual
comments. The annotations were collected on Klynt itself, and then
transferred to Atlas.ti for systematization. In the annotations heading, the
date, author of the comment and concept (based on coding) were
specified. In this case, significant sentences were highlighted based on
the pre-established codebook. These were collected in a process that was
synthesized for the purposes of this research, as reflected in Table 3.

In order to clarify the methodology followed and facilitate its un-
derstanding, Figure 3 is presented below, showing schematically the
entire research process.

### 3. Results

After the research, we obtained a series of results in different key
aspects of networked digital storytelling, which we list below.

#### 3.1. The digital avant-garde narrative: processes of fusion and fission

Networked digital narratives’ formats become less rigid and stable.
From a creation viewpoint, we can observe a series of common charac-
teristics in networked digital narratives that allow us to speak about
fusion (convergence) processes. These commonalities are their relation to
the Aristotelian canon, the nature of their code, or their cognitive pro-
cessing, among others. Table 4 shows some of the common aspects
extracted from the creator’s statements.

Simultaneously, the network digital disruption has led to a plurali-
ization of narrative acts, leading to an exponential multiplication of
projects, formats and meta-media. These are fission processes that will
sometimes lead to unique proposals that do not fit any of the already
existing taxonomies of the New Media. Table 5 shows each proposal’s
unique characteristics, emphasizing the essential qualities of their
idiosyncrasies:

- Taking into account the results of research related to fusion processes,
we are in a position to glimpse the creation of a total converging narra-
tive work, a perfect equilibrium between immersion, interactivity and
narrativity, surpassing real life in its narrative disposition and containing
a synthesis of all the types of forms and contents (Ryan, 1999). However,
as indicated by the fission processes themselves, this total work would be
just one of the possible permutations of the narrative act.

#### 3.2. Characteristics of networked digital formats

- Digital literature

The comments by David G. Forés about his work “I Poe” from Iclassics
(http://iclassicscollection.com/en/project/1poel/) reveal a series of
characteristics that could be considered universal. In digital literature,
the code precedes the alphabet, the screen (or new peripherals) substitutes paper and ink, the letter converges in multimedia, hypertext and interactivity. Technologically, there is a break with the traditional linearity and dramatic curvature. It emerges starting from the written word, establishing a direct and unbreakable relationship with intertextuality between digital codes, digitized codes and the original narrative.

- **Interactive fiction**

In “Corto interactivo de El Caso” ("Interactive short of El Caso newspaper") (http://lab.rtve.es/el-caso/), a transmedia layer is added to the series created by Television Española, adding a tale in which the user takes on the role of a rookie journalist in his or her first day of work in the

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| Table 2. Interview content coding. |
|-----------------------------------|
| **Main**                          | **Subcategories** |
| Digital Narrative                 | ND               |
| Author status                     | AU               |
| New idiosyncrasy of the user      | US               |
| Participation                     | PT               |
| Creation                          | CR               |
| Formats                           | FMT              |
| YouTube                           | YT               |
| Interactive Documentary           | DI               |
| Interactive fiction               | FI               |
| Videogame                         | VJ               |
| Digital Literature                | LD               |
| Common elements between formats   | FMC              |
| Differential elements between formats | FMD           |
| Digital potential employed in the creation process | PD             |
| Interactivity                     | IT               |
| Transmedia                        | TM               |
| Hypermedia                        | HM               |
| Connectivity                      | CN               |
| Virtuality                        | VR               |
| The narrative canon               | CA               |
| Creative processes                | PC               |
| Content                           | CO               |
| Form                              | FM               |
| Cognitive processes               | PCO              |

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Figure 1. Conditional-causal matrix of results obtained (conceptual map).
Figure 2. Project’s internal architecture and interactive relationships (Klynt's interface).
Table 3. Research journal extracts cross-referenced with codes.

| Main                                   | Highlighted notes                                                                 | Code          |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Author Status                          | The author is continuously thinking about how the user will act, and how his or her journey will be. | AU_IS. 120516. 1. |
| New idiosyncrasy of the user           | Keeping the users in mind implies, besides thinking about them, working with them to improve the experience. | US_IS. 240616. 1. |
| Creation                               | Complexity of the construction of the dramatic fluidity without linearity.         | CR_IS. 200616. 1. |
| Formats                                | The formats’ mimesis is postponed to a later phase due to time constraints.        | FMT_IS. 300716. 1. |
| Common elements between formats        | Double code: one binary and the one resulting from the meta coding of the combination of hypermedia and interactivity. | FMC_IS. 010716. 1. |
| Differential elements between formats  | Each format maintains its idiosyncrasy within the meta-narrative.                  | FMD_IS. 280716. 1. |
| Digital potential employed in the creation process. | The 5 keys are not only mechanical or conceptual. They conceal a combination order with a clear creative potential linked to a communicative, dramatic and aesthetic component. | PD_IS. 030816. 1. |
| The narrative canon                    | Beginning, middle and end give way to a non-linear rhizomatic creation, without pre-established paths with cathartic purposes. | CA_IS. 200616. 1. |
| Creative processes                     | Trial-error method.                                                                | PC_IS. 170516.1. |
| Content                                | Form and content are combined to reinforce the narrative purpose.                  | CO_IS. 200616. 1. |
| Form                                   | Synaesthetic creation procedure.                                                   | FM_IS. 010716. 1. |
| Cognitive processes                    | Relational and arboreal thought for hypermedia interactive construction becomes valuable. | PCO_IS. 220516. 1. |

Figure 3. Research process (Model’s Architecture).

Table 4. Synergies in key aspects of networked digital narratives.

| Regarding          | Fusion                                                                                      |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The canon          | - Redefinition of the Aristotelian canon in new dramatic tempos and rhythms.                 |
| Digital potential  | - Interactive hypermedia.                                                                     |
| The content        | - It is the story what indicates how the tale will be narrated                                |
| The form           | - Game mechanisms are assessed to ensure storytelling.                                         |
| Cognitive processing | - Arboreal, rhizomatic and relational thinking.                                              |
| Diffusion          | - In terms of impact, the Mass media still predominate (except in the case of videogames).    |
|                    | - Their co-habitation is sought in order to increase the reach of the stories through transmedia vectors. |
and the playability. In the game, the protagonist’s craziness (dramatic
third original dimension of the videogame should be noted: the mechanics
en-scene, the arsenal of codes that the medium provides and the story, the
also a great container and remixer of all of them. Together with the mise-
Interactive documentary The narrative starts from the territory of non-
ence from the documentary and link with the avant-garde (aesthetic-formal experimentation)

| Format          | Defining characteristics                                                                 | Registration code Atlas.ti |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Digital literature | Intertextuality with literature, Protagonism of text                                    | DF.ID.03, DF.ID.04          |
| Interactive fiction | The tale is placed in the territory of fiction, Heritage (script, mise en scene, dramatic development) of television series and films. | MH.ID. 01, MH.ID.04         |
| Videogame       | Creative freedom starting with the code, Container of Universes, Playability, mechanics and learning curves, Recreational aim. | AM.ID.01, AM.ID.02, AM.ID.03, AM.ID.04 |
| Interactive documentary | The narrative starts from the territory of non-fiction, Heritage from the documentary and link with the avant-garde (aesthetic-formal experimentation) | AG.ID.01, AG.ID.03 |
| YouTube         | Democratization of the audiovisual creation-diffusion, Model of community (subscriptions, comments, likes, share) | AL.ID.02, AL.ID.03          |

Table 5. Main characteristics of the analysed formats.

Editorial office of “El Caso” newspaper. The experience is personalized using a subjective camera, with a script oriented towards immersion into the fictional world of the series, through a set of strategies. This model of interactivity could be catalogued as diegetic digital interactivity, in which intervention by the user is presented as a requisite for the development of the narrative discourse. Thus, it is shaped as a decision-making process that culminate in alternative diegetic realities.

- **Videogame**

“Los Delirios de Von Sottendorf y su mente cuadriculada” (The deliriums of Von Sottendorf and his square mind) (https://www.deliriumstudios.com/los-delirios-de-von-sottendorff-y-su-mente-cuadriculada/) not only counts with references from films, dramaturgy and storytelling… it is also a great container and remix of all of them. Together with the mise-en-scene, the arsenal of codes that the medium provides and the story, the third original dimension of the videogame should be noted: the mechanics and the playability. In the game, the protagonist’s craziness (dramatic issue) is reflected on the mechanics through the introduction of an interactive grid that represents, in a denotative manner, the rooms in a mansion, and in a connotative manner, the disorganized mind of the Baron.

- **Interactive documentary**

-“Come/In/Doc” (http://www.comeindoc.com/) is placed within the category of the interactive metadocumentary. In it, the user occupies the main role in the presentation and structuration of the content. It has been designed according to the story and its aim, with a clear conscience of why the project is not linear. The topics addressed by Come/In/Doc frame a series of aspects around which the current interactive documentary orbits, such as new active subjectivities and the relocation of the user, collaborative aim, opening to participation and the extension of the project beyond its boundaries.

- **YouTube**

In the “Morgue de Aracnephobia” (=www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5hEOuKcArsk), the audiovisual pieces are made by Aracne, who creates her own scripts and makes decisions on what is to be published. In the videos by Aracne, the author confirms the search for convergence with her followers through direct inquiry and discussion. Its relationship is consecrated through the tangible interaction in the shape of comments, likes and shares. Processes of collective intelligence (Lévy, 2004) and participative culture (Jenkins, 2008) are shaped. In the community culture proposed by YouTube, Aracne acquires a multiple role, in which besides telling a story, she consumes, follows and subscribes to other content creators, commenting, participating and creating thus new contents.

3.3. The 5 key features of networked digital formats

Despite working in different ways of expression and communication, the study reveals a consensus on those technological and conceptual qualities that are more determinant when creating a networked digital narrative. Simultaneously, they show a clear tendency towards superposition, complementarity and hybridization.

- **Interactivity**

The study demonstrates that despite the banalization undergone by the concept (Aparici and Silva, 2012), the communication between man and machine/software is the core space from which networked digital narratives are conceived. Thus, without the physical intervention of the user, the stories do not evolve, do not occur. Interactivity, more than the mechanical action, can incorporate emotional, dramatic, cathartic values and aims, such as in “The deliriums of Von Sottendorf and his square mind”. It also makes possible the creation of layers of depth and knowledge.

- **Hypermedia**

Research suggests that hypermedia compose the backbone of the narratives, defining its structure and form. The codes fuse and intertwine themselves with the ultimate aim of better telling the story. The fluidity of the narrative will highly depend on the structure of its inner cartography. The user’s advances within the story are predefined, with the paths consolidating between the possible choices through interactivity.

- **Transmedia**

The creators recognize this key, referenced by García-Marín and Aparici (2020), Jenkins and Ford (2015) and Scolari (2013). Its implementation is produced as a natural extension of a main project. It usually starts with a main product from which different modalities are deployed. Full awareness and a strategic development of a transmedia project would require the individualized conception of each format from the start. Therefore, the design and the comprehensive transmedia execution for intermediate-scale projects, would significantly raise their costs, making them difficult to bear.

- **Virtuality**

Within digital mediation, virtuality is defined as a representation or creation based on binary codes with the interface, application and design as keys (Sherman and Craig, 2019). The interface and the hardware are very significant, as they delimit or expand the narrative experience from its construction. At present, the new wave of innovative devices, such as
the virtual reality devices or the re-activation of Augmented Reality offer revolutionary possibilities in terms of immersion, empathy and delving into the knowledge. The study, however, shows a certain distrust towards these devices, since the authors consider that the tool often formally overtakes the content, limiting the narratives and each format’s own expressive qualities.

- Connectivity

The integration of connectivity in narratives causes a double mutation: the role of the user is reshaped, and the process of reception and use of the stories is altered. The user takes on a main role, being able to grow, enrich and extend the life of the stories, in the diegesis as well as in the real world. The challenge is to find formulas that can make the user feel as an active protagonist, thereby succeeding in making the user feel as the story being his or her own. Contemporary narrative structures offer the possibility of linking with elements that are external to the narrative, nodes that reside in non-human applications and that are activated to the discretion of the author thanks to technology. It would be a procedure analogous to the one presented by Siemens (2006) in the characterization of Connectivism as a learning theory (also in Teixeira and Martini, 2020).

3.4. Reshaping the relationship between the user and the author

The constancy of the vertical model of authorship is diluted, creating dynamic narrative pacts between users and creators according to the project aim. The status of the Author-User binomial changes, displaying in practice the notion of Death of the author by Barthes (1968). The user journey, the emotional path that the user will experience with the work, plays a major role in the design and construction of the tale. A tendency towards the increase of the demand for participation by the receiver is observed. At this juncture, the author must meet the aim for which the story is told, despite the fact that the user's behaviour is not predictable due to his/her random selections as well as to his/her variable degree of participation. Beyond the technical possibilities, authors raise questions about the need and aim integrating participation and co-creation in their works. At this point, discrepancies among creators arise, mainly related to the nature of their projects.

Different authors and the research journal coincide in the fact that the objective is to articulate a creative, collaborative community that is emotionally involved. Despite this implication, the author, more or less explicitly, maintains the control of the work, defining the architecture of the narration and its multi-variables through the code. The authors are still the ones who assign a specific role for the user in terms of participation. As it occurs with the Mass Media, the uni-personal authorship is generally substituted by multidisciplinary teams in charge of specific tasks in the project's development, with programmers and code developers attaining a primary role.

3.5. The creative processes

The modus operandi in the creative processes conducted by the authors are related to the heterogeneous use of the keys described in this article. They are not just heterogeneous within different authors and formats, but also in the creation of the projects developed by a single author. Their application is mainly based on the instinct of those responsible of the projects and their development teams, through the trial-error method. There is not a predefined roadmap, although the authors agree in affirming that know-how accumulates. This provides them with greater agility in the development of projects, in the overcoming of already-known problems, as well as in the establishment of protocols and processes that ease the creation, production and diffusion. Against the idea of chaos and heterogeneity, the notion of laboratory fits more precisely in the definition of the creative process in networked digital narratives. Trials and errors become thus consolidated as central procedures in the construction of stories, in shape and content.

A tendency is confirmed by the creators in the use of the story (the content) as the starting point to develop the form used for its communication, along with a distrust towards technological impositions.

The in-depth analysis of research shows a more complex relationship between form and content that points to a progressive approach between the two spheres. It was observed that authors develop the how, the way the story is told, not only as a conditioning element, but as a system of signs that contains signifiers that point towards meanings. The form is taken into consideration for content creation according to the objectives of the narrative. A division into different ramifications of the cathartic finality is perceived, making the objectives of the networked digital narrative more complex in nature. There is also a propensity, to a greater or lesser degree, towards the symbiosis of form and content with the ultimate aim of enhancing the objectives.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The objective of delving into the knowledge of networked digital narratives from the perspective of their creation has allowed us to verify their state, in a contemporary society that is characterized by liquidity (Bauman, 1999) and by the generalized mistrust in the meta-narratives of modernity (Lyotard, 1987). In the scope of New Media, we follow the works that are focused on the particular attributes of phenomena associated to networked digital narratives: language (Manovich, 2005), digital literature (Murray, 1999), digital textuality (Ryan, 2004), erudite literature (Aarseth, 2007), drama in computers (Laurel, 2014), hypertext (Landow, 2006) or the transmedia narrative (Scolari, 2013; Dena, 2014), but maintaining the perspective of the creators in different digital formats as the main source of knowledge. Recently, Halverson (2018) addressed digital creation from the point of view of authorship but limiting his research to a single author who conducted his activity in multiple media platforms.

This study reveals that the classical conception of narrative has been surpassed and that there is a need to expand the corpus set forth by the narratology for the structural study of stories. We are in agreement with Ryan (2004) in that the narrative is not limited to the representation of past events by the narrator, and with the generalized notion pointed out by Clark et al. (2015) that the “Narrative exchange takes distinctive forms in the digital age”. Our research demonstrates that we ourselves facing a greater epistemological disruption: the digital narratives redefine the Aristotelian canon, since they are articulated on interactive hypermedia language. The linear cognitive processing gives way to rhapsodic, arboreal and relational reasoning, one in that the visual creative and sequential thinking gains importance against alphabetical-continuous thinking.

In relation to the features of the different networked digital formats, it was observed that there is an atomization occurring in the narratives. We have named them fusion and fision logics. Despite their generic coincidences, each modality shows a differential character that defines them as containers, as revealed by Montfort (2003) in relation to IF or Aarseth (2001), Juul (2003) and Fernández-Vara (2019) on videogames, initiating ad hoc epistemological research and frameworks for these areas. Thus, in the digital literature, we find intertextuality with regular literature. In interactive fiction, its hereditary nature with respect to the cinema and the television series. In the videogame, its entertaining aim, the playability, the mechanics and the learning curve. The non-fiction would be the guiding principle of the interactive documentary. And as for YouTube, we highlight the democratization of the video and the unique model of community through the parameters established by the software.

With respect to the principle of fusion, there is a series of keys for the creation of networked digital narratives. This is the case of interactivity, which is employed to provide digital inputs to the user after his or her participation, but also to provide cognitive and emotional responses and to offer layers of depth in the stories. Hypermedia also plays a great role, acting as the backbone of the stories, defining their structure and form,
coinciding with the approach proposed by Nelson (2003). Together with interactivity, it constitutes the substrate of the connected digital languages and its signs. Another of these keys is the transmedia, although its inception as a comprehensive strategy is far from the budget levels with which the creators interviewed work with, as it means high costs for their consecution. Another fundamental pillar is virtuality, which is commonly used through the interfaces, utilizing the screen as a peripheral element. Although this last element creates a certain mistrust towards the hardware that overtakes the content, in detriment of the full potential that could be harnessed in a vision like Laurel's (2014) using interfaces as metaphors that could “extend, amplify, and enrich our own capacities to think, feel, and act”. And, lastly, connectivity, creating the redefinition of the user's role, altering thus the process of reception and consumption of stories. The narratives are linked to people and with spaces that are external to their own formats, in a procedure that is analogous to the Theory of learning of connectivism (Siemens, 2006), offering a path towards the open work. Although the focus of our study was placed on the creative practice, the taxonomy of these key features offers certain similarities with the transversal attributes of the digital narrative and the qualities of the creations in the New Media environment proposed by authors such as Scolari (2008) or Ryan (2004).

The data collected show us the new role of the user, as he or she, along with his or her experience (the user's journey), is placed in the middle of the creator's concerns. In line with what was pointed by Ocak (2014) in relation to the new media documentary, these new stories transform “the cultural form of watching a film”. The opening towards the new active subjectivities implies a challenge that is very often transformed into frustration, since it is not easy to create live communities that are emotionally implicated and that empower the stories. In a more specific manner, it was verified that the author still maintains power over the narrative, preconceiving the experiences and predetermining user’s actions, defining from the basis of the code the boundaries and possible developments of the narrative action.

With all these potentialities, creators do not have preestablished guidelines and follow the procedure of trial and error as their modus operandi. The validity of their creations is agreed upon with the user through narrative pacts, with the particularity of dynamism and the multi-shaped character of the creator-narrative-user agreement. At this point, we find ourselves in a context that is similar to the perpetual beta defined by O'Reilly (2005) for open source.

The search for the symbiosis between form and content is used to enhance not only the story, but the aim for which it is told. The catharsis has been imbued with multiple permutations. We agree in this perspective with the reflection on the multivariant narratives by Ryan (2004).

We conclude that the continuous and constant emergence of new cultural and social demands, and the technological alterations, place us in “The explosion of storytelling and the pluralization of narrative acts”. It is impossible to address the narrative in the new media with the traditional parameters of narratology. In line with what was stipulated by Latheley et al. (2017), we hereby determine that there are many manifestations of the digital narrative. In addition, they do not behave as a unique and stable phenomenon, so that an ad infinitum review of the conclusions established in this work could be hoped for.

With all the above, this investigation allows us to form the basis of a line of research based on the authors, moving away from the most traditional external analytical reviews to know the phenomenon from the inside; from first-hand knowledge acquired from praxis and experience. This is in line with the importance of digital keys, the author-user relationship, new media forms and the creative process are obtained from real creators, and contrasted through the ABR and the construction of the metanarrative platform (available at http://www.contadoresdelcaos.com/).

The most evident constraint of the research comes from the limitation of the sample, both in the numerical aspect (the number of people interviewed) and in the modal aspect, as new formats of great social consolidation such as narratives through Instagram or TikTok are left out of the study. At the same time, the interpretation of the creative process developed in the ABR through the research journal is limited. It would be necessary to consider more complex options in order to record the knowledge obtained from the application of the arts in research.

Finally, we dare to propose some future lines of research: the inclusion of a greater variety of narrative modalities in the corpus (Podcast, Micro-poetry in social media, twovel, Digital art, cyberjournalism, Insta-gram stories, tik-tok…), research of networked digital language (hypermia, interactive) in semiotic terms, delving in line with O'Halloran et al. (2011) or Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the comparative analysis of users from different nationalities, and lastly the development of the narrative potentials of this language through creative labour. The benefits of this kind of practice have already been sketched out by studies conducted by Sneda et al. (2014) and Yang and Wu (2012), and put into practice in the present study in the platform Contadores del Caos (Storytellers of Chaos; http://www.contadoresdelcaos.com/). This last point is somewhat unusual in academic spheres, but it is indispensable to reach the true knowledge on networked digital narratives.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

M. Fandos-Igado: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.
I. Sanchez-Lopez: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data.
A. Pérez-Rodríguez: Performed the experiments.

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Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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