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Tales from the Timeline: Experiments with Narrative on Twitter

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Abs Abstract:

This article will provide an overview of the state of the art of contemporary forms of Twitterfiction, discussing the varieties and genres that have emerged to date, and considering the extent to which they could be described as ‘experimental’ based on existing theory. The article will argue that the most innovative examples of Twitterfiction play with key features and affordances of Twitter, but that this in itself may not constitute the kind of artistic experimentation that fundamentally disrupts or changes readers’ perceptions or expectations. Moving beyond the current preoccupation with examples of Twitterfiction as ‘short bursts of beauty’, the article will examine whether Twitter can support more sustained and immersive forms of narrative. It will also argue that in order to understand how these fictions work on Twitter we need to look at the narrative environment more broadly, to fully appreciate how these narratives impact on our daily lives, while also (re)connecting us with existing and traditional patterns and practices.

Digital technologies and new communication and networking tools have created both new challenges and opportunities for storytellers. While the rhetoric accompanying these emerging forms of narrative often hails their ‘revolutionary’ features, the debate continues as to whether the kind of work produced is truly experimental or of any lasting value. Despite restricting users to 140 characters, the online social networking service Twitter has proved to be a particularly fertile ground for the sharing of stories.¹ This can range from users tweeting anecdotes or creating fictional accounts to retellings of classic fiction and contributions to transmedia storytelling. Several high profile authors, including Jennifer Egan and David Mitchell, have utilized the platform as a way to reach new audiences, with mixed results. In 2012, the international online Twitterfiction festival was established to showcase work that ‘uses Twitter functionality in the most creative way possible’ and does ‘something more than just tweeting out a narrative line-by-line’.² Work

produced so far has included stories told from the perspective of a dog and an unborn baby, stories composed entirely of dialogue, and stories improvised in response to suggestions tweeted by readers.

This article will take a ‘bottom-up’³ approach to the analysis of Twitterfiction, seeking to arrive at an understanding of some of the distinctive features of this kind of writing by focusing on specific examples, rather than attempting to define the form or offer a typology.⁴ It will begin by outlining some of the key affordances of Twitter before going on to examine the state of the art, discussing the varieties and genres of Twitterfiction that have emerged to date, and considering the extent to which they could be described as ‘experimental’ based on existing theory. The article will argue that the most innovative examples of Twitterfiction play with key features and affordances of Twitter, but that this in itself may not constitute the kind of artistic experimentation that fundamentally disrupts or changes readers’ perceptions or expectations. Moving beyond the current preoccupation with examples of Twitterfiction as ‘short bursts of beauty’,⁵ the article will examine whether Twitter can support more sustained and immersive forms of narrative. It will also argue that in order to understand how these fictions work on Twitter we need to look at the narrative environment more broadly, as writers and artists⁶ strive to explore the possibilities of narrative experiences that impacts on our daily lives, while also (re)connecting us with existing and traditional patterns and practices.

Twitter was founded in 2006 and has over 300 million active users communicating in over 35 languages. Its mission statement as of February 2016 is ‘To give everyone the power to share ideas and information instantly, without barriers’ while the importance of storytelling is signalled by the web page’s banner, inviting users to ‘tell your stories here’.⁷ In all its iterations, the emphasis is on ‘real-time updates’ and the present tense and directive speech acts feature heavily, drawing users in and inviting participation. Users have to sign up to the service and set up an account. They can then follow the accounts of other users and be followed in turn, and tweets posted by followers will appear in their timeline with the most recent tweets appearing first.⁸ Various clients (e.g. TweetDeck, Twitterrific) exist offering users different interfaces and facilities. Many users will not only rotate between these clients, but will also access tweets via different devices, making it difficult to generalize about the user experience and the makeup of individual timelines.

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Accessing Twitter usually means rejoining the timeline⁹ where the user last left off, but it is up to users whether they begin reading at that point or scroll up to the most recent tweet and work their way backwards. Users can like/favourite tweets and retweet posts to followers, allowing them both to manage content and contribute to its distribution. They can also do this by using hashtags¹⁰ to start up conversations and create trending topics, or by replying to and quoting tweets. Though Twitter is mainly about sharing text, the facility exists to link to images and videos from within the 140 characters of the tweet. While tweets rapidly disappear from most users' busy timelines, they can be archived and retrieved by various means, or collated and preserved through screenshots and tools such as Storify.¹¹ In early 2016 rumoured changes to the service including removing the cap on the length of tweets resulted in an outcry from users, horrified at the prospect that many of the features people once found confusing and restrictive but which had now become affectionately familiar could soon disappear.¹²

While it is tempting to herald the 'Twittersphere' as bringing in a whole host of new and unique forms of social interaction, as critics of technological determinism remind us, the impact and influence of new communication tools has to be understood as resulting from and responding to a whole range of complex social, economic and political forces. To understand the phenomenon of Twitter, and its emergence as a platform for storytelling, we therefore need to consider the context that produced it, and the specific needs it seems to address. Writing of the impact of earlier technologies including the World Wide Web and email, Bolter claims that they 'facilitate a culture of temporary allegiances and changing cultural positions'.¹³ Social networking and the culture of following and liking might be said to further exacerbate the shift towards temporary allegiances, while hashtags and Twitter 'storms'¹⁴ demonstrate how rapidly stances and positions change. The need for constant updating and short bursts of information that Twitter more specifically caters to also arises from more deeply embedded and widespread changes to the way in which information is mediated and circulated, and the expectations users have that these can be seamlessly integrated into their everyday routines and activities.

Although Twitter may appear perplexing to non-users, uptake of the service has been rapid and widespread. Yet as Raymond Williams¹⁵ points out in his critique of technological determinism, when new tools and platforms appear, users often subvert and stretch their intended purposes in ways that are unpredictable. While much of the early

excitement about Twitter concerned its facility for conveying breaking news, virtually from the outset it was put to more creative uses, particularly through the creation of spoof or parody accounts for real or fictional personages, but also through attempts to use the platform for the creation of suspenseful narratives. One of the earliest examples was New York Times journalist Matt Richtel's real-time thriller, the 'Twiller' which appeared in 2008, following the story of a man who wakes up with amnesia fearing he may be a murderer. Described by Richtel as 'an experiment in a new medium', he reported that the story confused many people, confessing that 'I don't know if the story will catch much attention, but, then again, it doesn't require much attention at all'.¹⁶ While it is tempting to characterize Twitterfiction as arising out of a culture of shrinking attention spans, Richtel's own narrative demonstrated that readers would return again and again to pick up the threads of a well-told tale, and that it could capture the attention of a wide range of users, including cultural commentators and critics.

However, it was rising to the challenge of telling a story within 140 characters that dominated early discussions of Twitterfiction. Antecedents for this kind of microfiction can be found in Japanese cellphone fiction (*keitai shosetsu*), the 100 word 'drabble' in fanfiction circles, and flashfiction, a form which has produced its own competitions, awards, and even its own 'National Day'.¹⁷ In his study of contemporary forms of 'microfiction', Nelles reminds us that 'there have always been artists willing to risk the miniature' going back as far as ancient forms such as the parable and the fable.¹⁸ Yet Twitter's seeming constraints appear to have provided added impetus for users to seek out ever more innovative workarounds and ways of standing out from the busy flow of information with which they have to compete.

Canadian author Arjun Basu has been composing 'twisters' (his term for short stories told on Twitter) since 2008, posting at least a tweet a day, usually featuring relationship mishaps affecting an unnamed 'he' and 'she' as in the following example:

He wears his success with a mixture of pride and self loathing. She sniffs the air and makes a face. I know, he sighs, stroking his billfold.¹⁹

With over 175,000 followers, Basu provides his readers with a daily 'fix' of these short tales based on set themes perfect for reading on the go. Followers know what to expect, but each twister offers just enough intrigue and ambiguity to stimulate the imagination. These self-contained and portable stories can work across international time zones,

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and do not require that followers hold on to information from previous tweets, or even that they read all of the tweets, or read them in a set order.

One of the most prolific and long-standing of Twitterfiction exponents, Basu, like many Twitter authors, also enjoys a career as a novelist and short story writer offline. For many such writers, Twitter provides a platform for playful engagement with readers, helping to generate a strong following for their work. It can also be a means of eliciting feedback on works in progress, as in the case of British author David Mitchell whose Twitterfiction 'The Right Sort' paved the way for his next novel, *Slade House*, published a year later in 2015. This laying bare of the writing process, and the type of engagement it can establish with readers, represents just the kind of 'process-oriented' writing described by Bray et al in their study of experimental literature, whereby the writer 'invites us into the workshop to witness the experiment as it unfolds'.²⁰ The authors distinguish this form of experimentation from other more familiar accounts, where experimentation is defined as raising fundamental questions about the nature of art, or as a radical reconstitution of language, technique or form. This focus on the process of production and reception is especially useful for new media writing and art where the transparency of the creative process is crucial to engaging audiences and readers.

Although Crouch argues that Twitter does have the potential for writing to engage in the kind of 'wild formal invention'²¹ more closely associated with avant-garde experimentalism, genre fiction continues to proliferate, providing readers with recognizable patterns and conventions from Gothic horror (@veryshortstory) or science fiction (@jeffnoon). The focus in these fictions is often on action and outlandish or extreme events and, with the exception of Basu, there has been noticeably less emphasis on character development or relationships. A sense of familiarity and continuity is, however, provided by the fact that many of these stories are generated by a single author figure receptive to engaging in discussion with followers. Nevertheless, social networks such as Twitter are also associated with the idea of crowdsourcing and collaboration, so in some instances followers may be invited to participate in the telling of the tale. This could include tweeting stories using a shared hashtag suggesting a theme, event or genre for users to work with, for example the #seattlenoir project in 2013. Alternatively, individual users might take on the telling of part of an ongoing story for a competition or challenge, as in the Tim Burton-inspired #Burtonstory

from 2010, which featured the character of Stainboy familiar to fans of the film director's work.

Twitter is by no means unique in offering readers and audiences the opportunity to contribute to the creative process, as theorists of contemporary media's participatory cultures²² argue that the boundaries between producer and consumer, author and reader, are continually being redefined.²³ As Kirschenbaum puts it, today we are confronted with a 'landscape of authorship and reading that is no longer confined to simple geometries and lines of influence'.²⁴ Through the practices developed on social media and the World Wide Web, writing is increasingly seen not so much as a private activity but rather as something that is inherently dialogic and social,²⁵ with the process of writing itself becoming the object of attention, laid bare for readers to comment on and help shape. Readers, likewise, become hunter gatherers²⁶ continually seeking out and sharing content, rather than waiting for that content to be served up to them. With services such as Twitter, the fact that users are regularly checking timelines and following hashtags makes participation in storytelling seem much more like a natural extension of the activities that draw users to the service in the first place.

With many of the examples discussed so far, experimentation is largely confined to the circumstances of the telling and to the ways in which users play with the medium specific affordances of Twitter. So, in other words, if we encountered these stories outside of Twitter they might not seem experimental at all. With their heavy reliance on familiar narrative structures and genre conventions, these stories seem to reproduce what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the familiar scripts of popular culture, rather than the militant anti-narrativity she associates with avant-garde experimentalism.²⁷ Even where interactivity and non-linearity are introduced, this may be more game-like than radically experimental. For example, *A Dreadful Start* (@wnd_go), created by British developer and production manager Terence Eden, brings the choose-your-own-adventure format to Twitter, offering readers some degree of interactivity as they make choices about the direction the narrative will take from within individual tweets. However, these choices are very limited and the plot and characters offer minimal development, so while the experiment does explore what can be done by linking multiple accounts and perhaps shows the potentiality for branching and interactivity, the novelty of the format soon wears off.

Twitter is perhaps better placed to recreate the radical aleatory experiments of the 'cut-up' technique made famous by William

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Burroughs and others in the sixties, teasing readers with fragments that hold out the promise of some kind of meaningful connection, but also challenging the very idea that meaning can be predicted or consciously controlled. David Mitchell acknowledges that his attempt to write for Twitter was inspired by the Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) movement in France in the sixties and its explorations of the ‘potential’ of literary writing working against the constraints of language and form.²⁸ Meanwhile Twitter’s infiltration by various kinds of ‘bots’ producing automated posts to promote products or services has inspired more creative plays on the random and the surreal. @MagicRealismBot tweets stories every two hours inspired by Borges’ ‘hyperteleological’ creations, where an underlying structure or principle is repeated and exaggerated ad absurdum.²⁹ @MagicRealismBot has clearly been crafted by a writer (Australian-based digital author and academic Chris Rodley) who knows the genre intimately, but it is the ambiguity about the extent to which the resulting tweets are random or cleverly contrived that provides part of the pleasure of following the account:

An alchemist searches for a pair of spectacles which lets him see every grand piano on earth.

A stone-hearted poet spends 38 years writing a notebook about Minotaurs.

With its mix of fantastical and real settings, and its repetition of grammatical structures, @MagicRealismBot plays with the idea of variations on a theme in a way that is not too distant from the twisters of Arjun Basu, but with a nod to the knowing reader familiar with the genre and its political and cultural landscapes, and with more of an emphasis on the surreal and the illogical.


Also utilising automated feeds, @UlyssesReader and @finnegans-reader offer line by line ‘readings’ of Joyce’s novels on an endlessly repeated loop. Run by Finnish software architect and android developer Timo Koola, the exercise somehow succeeds in providing readers with ‘footholds up [the] sheer face’³⁰ of experimental writing which has routinely been described as difficult if not unreadable. The retellings primarily work by allowing readers to enjoy the works in fragments, savouring in particular their linguistic and typographical play as single words or even punctuation marks are foregrounded. This suggests that Twitter can work as a platform for celebrating linguistic and formal experimentation and play, freeing readers up to appreciate and enjoy that experimentation without being weighed down by the prospect of attempting to conquer the ‘sheer face’ of a literary behemoth. However,

they also allow for a more sequential and cumulative reading, with all the sense of anticipation, immersion and the building of the narrative that novelistic writing can provide.

With these automated accounts, the design and delivery of the user experience is down to coding and algorithms, rather than creative choices made by (human) authors. Nevertheless, writers of Twitterfiction frequently talk about the challenge of planning and curating the reading paths of users, even while they recognize that controlling how their stories are accessed and consumed is especially problematic.³¹ Much of the excitement about Twitterfiction concerns the seeming freedoms and control it offers users, particularly as regards providing followers with a social environment in which their journey through a narrative can be easily shared. Twitter has long been recognized as a way for television audiences to share ‘watercooler’ moments, particularly regarding news and sporting events, or dramatic high points in serial narratives. But users also turn to Twitter to share their experiences of reading literary texts: inspired by the 2016 BBC adaptation of *War and Peace*, the hashtag #mytolstory allowed those attempting to read or re-read Tolstoy’s novel to compare their progress. Following any narrative on Twitter allows users to easily see the reactions of others, or simply note how many retweets or likes a particular tweet has received. As a result of such a visible and public collective response, a strong sense of momentum and community can build amongst users, particularly where the narrative that brings them together unfolds over a period of weeks or even years.

After a discussion we had one day about cellphone stories and the rise of social media, my university colleague Chindu Sreedharan took it upon himself to set out to retell the Indian epic the Mahabharata, taking 1605 days to complete the story. Drawing its inspiration from Prem Panicker’s recounting of events from the perspective of Bhima,³² @epicretold gathered a following of over 3000 users. However, the pressure of scheduling the writing and meeting the demands of his readers for constant updates proved difficult for the author. The long periods of inactivity that punctuated the telling were compensated, according to Sreedharan,³³ by tried and tested techniques designed to retain the reader’s interest, including cliffhangers and flashforwards or foreshadowing of events yet to happen. For example, at the end of Episode 11, ‘The Lost Quest’, a mysterious girl is referred to, and the episode ends with a dilemma for the hero:

And now, another night after, here I am still, unable to forget the girl I had seen.

Still unsure whether to pursue her or move on 

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The storyline is picked up in the next tweet, which begins a new episode ('The Other Hidimbi'). Over the course of the retelling the author maintained a constant dialogue with his followers, and provided access to the tweets via his website so that latecomers could catch up with the story and read the tweets chronologically. As a former journalist interested in how Twitter could be used for breaking news, Sreedharan was able to inject a sense of suspense and even urgency into the retelling by manipulating the affordances of the service. As well as providing an illustration of how serialization can work on Twitter, @epicretold is also fascinating because it manages to recreate some of the features of oral tellings and retellings of the tales, especially through its conversational and digressive style, the episodic structure and the interaction between the storyteller and his audience. Therefore, while @epicretold was undoubtedly an experiment, and a challenge for both author and readers, it relied heavily on traditional storytelling and journalistic techniques. After the experiment had ended on Twitter, @epicretold was published in book form (*Epic Retold*) by Random House, helping to consolidate the idea of the fiction as a discrete text, and its author as the creative source. Nevertheless, reproducing the fiction in print proved just as much an experiment as the initial project, with the absence of so many of the defining characteristics of Twitter, not to mention the voices of the followers, significantly reducing its effectiveness in handling the specific affordances of the medium.

The social and 'live' aspects of Twitter as a storytelling environment provide new opportunities for tracking how stories unfold, and how readers respond to narratives told in real time. It also raises many issues to do with who controls the narrative, and suggests that reception may be much more complex and multi-layered than is the case with accounts of the experience of reading which have tended to characterise it as one of absorbing discrete texts undistracted. The possibility of linking outwards to other content, and the creation of multiple connected accounts further allow for the creation of a sense of a 'multidimensional realtime'³⁴ of a rich and involving kind. In her account of distributed narratives where storytelling is dispersed across time, space and media, Walker remarks on how these narratives have the potential to 'cross over into our daily lives'.³⁵ As narrative tweets appear in our timelines alongside all the other news and chatter that fills the Twittersphere, the effect can often be jarring, much as in instances of metalepsis or 'breaking the frame' in print fiction, where the reader is accosted by a character or voice from the fictional world who intrudes into their sense of reality. However, as well as having the potential to shock or terrify, the effect can also be highly

exhilarating and thrilling, creating for users the sense that they are part of a story whose outcomes may be unpredictable or improvised according to how circumstances unfold. The experience being offered to followers is thus imbued with a 'strong sense of potentiality,'³⁶ gathering momentum as more and more followers join, and bringing them back time and time again to see how things turn out.

Margolin³⁷ has argued that contemporary culture is characterized by a preference for stories that relate not what has happened, but what is happening, and that place the emphasis on telling the story 'as you live'. This is nowhere more evident than on Twitter with its constant reiteration of the need to update in 'real time'. Meanwhile, John Fiske's concept of 'nowness' in television has been extended to the analysis of cross-platform viewing and fan cultures in the digital age as well as to social media.³⁸ In his account of the 'nowness' of television, Fiske³⁹ argues that the phenomenon is not confined to live programming, but is something that can accrue over time for viewers who return to the same locations and characters over periods of months and years, leading to a kind of engagement and affective bond that can be powerful. Retellings of familiar tales such as @epicretold can therefore recreate a sense of 'nowness' for its followers, while Twitter is also able to stage storytelling events that offer users something much closer to a 'live' experience.

Like other narratives designed for mobile and cross-platform consumption, with Twitterfiction 'the distinctions drawn between inside the story and outside the story take on a new kind of fluidity'.⁴⁰ Twitter narratives often blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional, both to offer social commentary on news or political events, and to engender in readers the feeling that the need to keep up with the story and that their participation is not just desired but necessary. Twitter has proved to be a successful platform for revisiting historical events, for example drawing on letters or diary entries from historical figures (@samuelpepys). In addition, projects such as @TitanicRealTime and @RealTimeWWII use the discourse of live commentary to invite followers to experience historical events as if for the first time, and to see themselves as participants or witnesses rather than detached observers. For Crouch, it is work that 'embraces the quotidian nature of Twitter and its movements in real time'⁴¹ that is likely to prove the most innovative, and what these historical examples suggest is that readers are fully prepared to suspend disbelief so that they can involve themselves in the dailiness and nowness of events from the past.

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Nigerian-American writer, journalist and photographer Teju Cole has become one of the most celebrated of Twitter writers through his experiments with creative nonfiction and his incisive commentaries on the social and political issues of the day. Between 2011 and 2013, Cole developed his own distinctive form of Twitterfiction, the ‘small fate’, based on the French literary *fait divers*, which he translates as ‘news of the weird’.⁴² Cole defines the form as featuring ‘an event, usually of a grim nature, animated sometimes, but not always, by a certain irony’. On his website, Cole cites the following example, in which he used real life crime stories from Nigerian newspapers as his inspiration:

‘Nobody shot anybody,’ the Abuja police spokesman confirmed, after the driver Stephen, 35, shot by Abuja police, almost died.⁴³

Cole has been quoted as saying that what first attracted him to Twitter was his realization that ‘That’s where the people are, so bring the literature to them right where they are’,⁴⁴ and he exploits Twitter’s ability to allow him to ‘put something into people’s day’⁴⁵ to draw attention to events and perspectives that may be discomfiting. For instance, in ‘Seven short stories about drones’, published on Twitter in 2013, he inserts news of the devastating consequences of drone strikes into a series of tweets featuring the opening lines from landmark literary texts such as Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

In the best traditions of experimental writing, Cole’s work is difficult to categorize. His most experimental work to date is ‘Hafiz’, a story recounted via thirty-one retweets from thirty-one different Twitter accounts of a man found lying on the ground in the street. ‘Hafiz’ is framed by the perspective of an unnamed first person narrator’s meditative reflections on the event, but interspersed with the reactions of various passers-by.⁴⁶ Cole describes the decision to tell the story via retweets as ‘an occasion for grace, for doing something unusual together’,⁴⁷ drawing attention to the phenomenon of retweeting and ‘how you can make someone else present in your timeline’ while also creating a collaborative storytelling situation capable of being experienced in many different ways by users. The story can be accessed in its entirety as orchestrated by Cole on his Twitter feed, and repetition and echoing help to create a strong choral effect. Nevertheless, followers of the individual real-life accounts of the retweeters might only ever encounter single tweets and perspectives, providing multiple points of entry for readers, and facilitating the kind of distributed narrative experience discussed earlier.

Many of the examples of Twitterfiction discussed so far connect outwards, whether that is to a pre-existing text, an author's website, or other networks and sharing services such as Instagram or YouTube. This adds again to the sense of narrative as something that is distributed across platforms and networks, and as something that readers and followers can participate in by distributing to their networks. In particular, Twitter has become an important platform for transmedia storytelling, defined by Jenkins a 'process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels' and where 'each medium makes its own unique contribution to the story'.⁴⁸ In his study of the Twitter feed for the launch of role-playing videogame *Mass Effect 3*, Holmes argues that the story arc, produced in real time 'as if' the story were taking place in the real world, relied on the fact that Twitter was 'enmeshed with the everyday stream of other writing and reading' that entered into the real world of the reader.⁴⁹ According to Holmes, it is the fact that readers experience events 'as if' real that motivates them to participate by creating supplemental stories as well as interacting with other readers.

As in the example of *Mass Effect 3* and many other transmedia franchises, Twitter provides a point of entry for users, but is not necessarily central to the creation of the storyworld. However, in some cases, the narrative is more clearly designed around Twitter, such that once the experience unfolding in real time is over, it cannot fully be recovered or recreated. Screenwriter Kristi Barnett's 'Twitter movie', *Hurst*, won the People's Choice award at the New Media Writing Prize⁵⁰ in 2012. Combining pre-filmed video footage and photographs with a scripted narrative unfolding over Twitter, the project invited followers to share Karen Barley's perspective as she and her boyfriend are drawn in to increasingly bizarre and terrifying events over a three-week period. Karen's increasing bewilderment is effectively conveyed by the frantic tweets, seemingly composed in a hurry and reaching out to followers for help and advice:

Hello? WHERE'S MY BOYFRIEND Can anyone see this? I can't use my phoen
I mean no one is answering; why aren't they answeinhg

Followers stumbling across the account could easily assume reading the above tweet that 'Karen' was actually in peril, especially as she provides followers with updates of her whereabouts, using services such as foursquare to link to GIS data. To add to the 'reality effect' Karen's tweets continually provide a context and rationale for her reliance on

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Twitter to communicate her situation to the wider world. As well as news that her ‘phoen’ isn’t working she tells us that she is going to ‘keep tweeting to calm me down so I don’t freak out again’. Karen’s character is developed over the course of the tweets, providing us with information about her boss and her dead parents and using the kind of language and paralanguage (emoticons, acronyms etc) we might expect from a young woman conversant with social media and used to providing constant updates about her situation and state of mind.

Hurst is an example of a trend in new media narratives towards time-bound narrative experiences which rely on participation from users as they are caught up in events as they unfold, aware that those events are only ‘as if’ real, but wanting the experience to be as thrilling and involving as possible.⁵¹ In the case of *Hurst*, for example, the credit sequence and web page hosting the trailer for the project clearly frame the events as a fiction that has been produced and put together for our entertainment. But followers’ reactions to Karen’s story on Twitter perpetuate the illusion that all of this is really happening. In the following examples, emoticons and punctuation help convey the users’ affective response to Karen’s situation, while they also address her directly and offer her advice as to how to save herself:

WTF??? i’d be seriously considering packing a bag and getting the f**k out of
Dodge if i were you! :O

I told you that you should have gone into the woods to look for him.

This demonstrates Walter’s⁵² contention that the networked reading experience is one in which the comments posted by readers are intrinsic not peripheral elements, often explicitly curated and moderated by authors who recognize the contribution they make. It also offers us an example of a narrative experience where users are not only followers of the story, but are in turn followed by that story, as the constant updates and reactions to events become embedded in the routines of their mediated lives.

With these kinds of cross-platform, improvisatory and immersive narratives, the staging of the user experience and the role of the user as a potential performer make it difficult to define where the boundaries might lie between narrative and drama, authors and directors and readers and performers. Experimentation is thus much more about exploring these liminal spaces and providing followers with the experience of ‘nowness’ than about creating a fictional text or artefact that can be revisited or stored, making it difficult for such work to receive close

critical attention after the event. The establishment of the Twitterfiction festival is significant in terms of foregrounding and consolidating some of the experiments that are taking place, as well as providing a kind of validation and helping to raise the profile of the new and emerging forms being developed. The idea of the festival also helps to connect Twitterfiction with established literary and artistic prizes and events, where innovation may be recognized but where connection with tradition and history may also be important. However, as this article has demonstrated, the relationship between writers and their readers as we understand it from print fiction is fundamentally challenged and disrupted in all sorts of ways on Twitter.

With digital narratives such as those found on Twitter it can be all too easy to confuse works that experiment with the affordances of a medium with experimentation that somehow fundamentally challenges or disrupts existing artistic practices. It can also be tempting to reserve the label 'experimental' purely for those works that consciously align themselves with the avant garde, while characterising participatory cultural spaces as being more about reproducing or rebooting popular genres and scripts. I hope to have demonstrated in this article that Twitter provides a rich platform for storytelling, going far beyond the challenges of telling a discrete story in 140 characters, to include explorations of the boundaries between fiction and reality, past and present, live storytelling and retelling. It remains to be seen whether the examples discussed here, and Twitter as it currently exists, will survive beyond the present moment. But I hope to have shown that these 'timeline tales' do provide interesting perspectives on our hunger for stories, as we seek out new ways of immersing ourselves in narrative worlds that unfold across time and space and are increasingly invited to participate in the processes by which those worlds are constructed, maintained and shared.

Many thanks to Chindu Sreedharan, Arjun Basu, Kristi Barnett and Chris Rodley for permission to quote tweets. Selected examples from the work of Teju Cole have been taken from his website.

NOTES

- 1 Drama and poetry also flourishes on Twitter. @lemnissay regularly tweets short poems to his followers. In 2010 the Royal Shakespeare Company participated in an improvised real time Twitter drama based on *Romeo and Juliet* called Such Tweet Sorrow.

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- 2 www.twitterfictionfestival.com
- 3 The ‘bottom up’ approach is one widely adopted in studies of digital fiction and new media narrative. See for example Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, David Ciccoricco, Hans Rustad, Jess Lacetti and Jessica Pressman’s ‘A [S]creed for Digital Fiction’, *electronic book review*, 2010 < <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/DFINative> > [accessed 25/5/16]
- 4 Bryan Alexander categorizes Twitter storytelling into four modes in *The New Digital Storytelling* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011). However, this attempt at a typology has already been shown to be lacking, for example in Anna Notaro’s discussion of Twitter in ‘How Networked Communication has changed the way we tell stories’, *Between*, 4.8 (2014), pp. 1–31 < <http://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/article/view/1341/1175> > [accessed 30/11/16].
- 5 Ruth Franklin, ‘Can You Write a Novel on Twitter?’ < <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/28/can-you-write-a-novel-on-twitter/> > [accessed 23/3/16]
- 6 A variety of terms for authors/producers and readers/users/participants will be used in the article, symptomatic of the fact that in many cases the fictions discussed are multimodal and game-like.
- 7 < <https://about.twitter.com/company> > [accessed 23/2/16]
- 8 Controversially, Twitter introduced a ‘while you were away’ feature in early 2016, potentially changing the ways in which tweets appear in users’ feeds. However, users can still choose how they want their feed to appear, and can also set this to appear differently across different Twitter clients.
- 9 A user’s timeline is made up of the stream of tweets from accounts they follow on Twitter. How the timeline appears can be customized to a degree depending on the Twitter client being used. Rejoining one’s timeline after a gap takes you back to where you left off, but it is possible with some clients at least to navigate to the most recent tweet.
- 10 A hashtag is a label or tag preceded by the symbol # which makes it easier for users to locate messages on the same theme.
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