Interstory: A Study of Reader Participation and Networked Narrative in Media Convergence

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Abstract

Our current media ecology has seen the proliferation of narrative. Websites, blogs, videos, multimedia mash-ups, but also books, magazines and other print materials are being used frequently together to tell stories. Bearing this phenomenon in mind, I propose the term interstory to characterize a particular narrative tendency. Interstory is a narrative constituted by a network of story pieces published in different media and compiled by readers following the textual and media links laid out by an author/editor. In order to test and elaborate the concept of interstory, I take as a study case Hernán Casciari’s and Christian Basilis’ Orsai. The project contains three blogs, a print magazine, a web magazine, a publishing house, and an iPad application. All of them are joined together by the story of Orsai’s own development and by a solid online/offline community of readers. Because of the media characteristics and large-scale of the object under examination, I propose a methodology for the study of narrative as a network composed of authors, texts, media of publication, readers, and readers’ input. A graph database has been built to account for these components and facilitate their analysis. This has allowed the exploration of which narrative contents are encompassed by the project, where they are published, when and in what media, what their function is in the overall project, and how the readers’ respond to them. The prominence of readers in this kind of narrative also required the development of a methodology to study reading practices in Orsai’s different media. From this study it is possible to conclude that narrative is by no means under crisis in the digital age. As a matter of fact, readers are avid participants of narrative enterprises building a highly prosocial environment of interaction. That narrative has been an imperative throughout human history is an explanation of this. Nonetheless, as I show in this thesis, the expectations of readers and the media currently available are indeed having an impact on how narrative is created, distributed and consumed, thus giving way to new and exciting projects, and opening up the possibilities of narrative and literary studies.

Keywords

Media Convergence, Intermediality, Narrative, Biocultural Criticism, Cognitive Literary Studies, Metafiction, Reader, Graph Database, Network, Digital Media, Digital Humanities.
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Introduction

Long before I started studying literature in 2000 I used to ask myself the question How I could possibly be fooled by narrative fiction so easily? I’m surely not alone when I remember (or perhaps it is better to say do not remember) entire days inhabiting other times and other places, other locations and other skins. The revolution brought about by the popularization of the Internet has had a similar effect of fascination on me. The World Wide Web has caused a paradoxical expansion and shrinking of the world and offered information and landscapes as distant in space and time as those found in fiction. Jointly, increasing access to the Internet and the explosion of fictional and other kinds of stories poured in it have changed the dynamics of narrative creation, publication, distribution and consumption. Questions about the puzzling effects narrative fiction has always had on readers, about the still perplexing potential of the Internet to foster similar experiences, and about the emerging ways in which they are coming together led me to this research project.

For a long time, I thought issues of narrative and fiction were about literature and reading. Doubtless, literary theory has provided a long tradition of the study of narrative and fictional components that cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, I am now convinced that fiction and narrative are much broader categories aiding how we understand the world. In the last couple of decades, studies from a wide range of disciplines have turned to narrative as a way of explaining processes of identity formation and dealing with trauma (Psychology), persuasion strategies (Marketing), illness prevention (Health Sciences), historiographical constructions (History), the emergence of user generated content (Media Studies) to mention but a few. The focus of this study remains largely literary inasmuch as its aim is to explain narrative and fictional constructions in our current media ecology, even when they seem to be increasingly closer to the actual world. Many of the most salient concepts: narrative, episode, reader, and author come out of literary and narrative theories. This notwithstanding, I have opened up the theoretical frame to embrace insights from evolutionary and cognitive studies — grouped together under the umbrella term of biocultural criticism, and media studies.
Because of its object of study and its methodology, this thesis can be located within the field of Digital Humanities. Conceptually, this thesis rests on the postulate that human practices associated with narrative have moved to the digital sphere, and humanities scholars should follow suit. The study of a cultural object such as media convergence’s literary products and the readers’ interactions with them through online platforms is a result of the digital shift.

Interstory, the proposed term for a recurrent narrative tendency, constitutes an instance of how literary products are being created, published, distributed, and consumed by audiences under the influence of digital culture and computer mediated communication. The move to digital media has made possible the study of reader interaction with a story. Up until now, the tradition of Reader Response Theory and adjacent approaches have been able to propose only theoretical models for the study of reading responses; conversely, the information found on Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs offers the possibility of studying actual readers’ responses. This work proposes a methodology to carry out such a study, but also to test the limits of the information we are capable of obtaining through these media. Methodologically, this thesis relies on the computation of data, both textual and paratextual, to observe the large-scale dynamics of the case study: Hernán Casciari’s and Christian Basili’s Orsai. The proposed approach owes much to Franco Moretti’s theorizations on distant reading, “where distance… is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems” (par. 10).

Finally, this study is also an exercise on collaboration – a tenet of Digital Humanities practices – and I have much to thank my colleague Javier de la Rosa who carried out a vast portion of the large-scale computational analysis.

Furthermore, this thesis is concerned with narrative as it oscillates between fictionality and factuality, narrative that is created in the interaction of authors and readers in real time and making use of a variety of media platforms. In other words, this work deals with a kind of narrative that is only possible given the current media ecology and the practices associated with it. While I propose a term to refer to these phenomena, interstory, by no means is it intended as a way of establishing a new genre. Interstory is a heuristic term aimed at grouping a tentative cluster of characteristics observed in a small corpus of texts that are interconnected with much larger media, literary and social phenomena. The contribution of this work, then, is not only the study of a literary phenomenon as it presently develops, at a
time when literary production and publishing is under reconfiguration, but also the integration of a set of concepts and methodologies from different disciplines in order to account for the multiple dimensions of the object of study. In that way, the methodological approach has been built from the bottom up observing the features of the case study and then seeking to explain them from fitting perspectives. Ultimately, the purpose of this thesis is threefold: First, I propose a social-cognitive explanation for the pervasiveness of narrative in the digital age. Based on evolutionary studies of art and narrative, I argue that the urge to tell stories is intimately bound to sharing information and empathizing with others. Consequently, narrative emerges out of social interaction at the same time that it fosters it. Because of their social characteristics, a large portion of digital media is facilitating the emergence of much narrative content. Second, to characterize narrative’s affective influence over readers throughout history as a form, and an antecedent, of what we have come to known as participation in our current media ecology. In that sense, I take the reader, not just as a person who reads written signs, but as someone involved in the recreation of a story regardless of what media is used to tell it. Finally, to suggest that these two points, sociality and reader affective involvement, are at the basis of the striking success of participatory media and the deep engagement narratives emerging out of them cultivates. Furthermore, the two seem to remain constant regardless of whatever technological developments are achieved at any given moment in history.

Five threads traverse this thesis: 1) The issue of narrative and fiction as human imperatives. Narrative constitutes a thought mechanism through which we construct worlds both actual and fictional – and everything in between. In this light, even when it has an aesthetic purpose narrative is not dependent of medium and can be rendered through oral narration, written language, film, photography, among others. 2) The sociality fostered by narrative. The construction of shared worlds provides a space to share information, to interact and to try out possible scenarios. Because of this, we are deeply emotionally and mentally affected by narrative and fiction. This again is not dependent on media, but a medium’s particular affordances might have an effect on how the interactions are carried out (face to face, computer mediated, object mediated, etc.) and, as a result, what kind of affect readers can be subject to. 3) Digital and interactive media, in the context of Web 2.0, has been so successful socially as well as narratively because its design, like any other technology’s, emerges out of
our cognitive architecture. As the result of a really long history of evolution and development, our brains both limits and enables us, as Norman Holland puts it. With this in mind, new technologies, far from threatening narrative fiction and literature, provide new ways of creating and recreating them that cannot possibly obliterate past traditions. 4) In the context of media convergence, the proliferation of platforms, devices and other avenues to create, distribute and consume narrative are heightening and literalizing the worldmaking powers of fiction and narrative, making them immersive, not just mentally and emotionally, but even physically. 5) Finally, the actualization of narrative, the fact that stories are now commonly overflowing out of the pages and screens where we first access them, is responsible for a metafictional tendency. Metafiction was a concept first developed in the mid-twentieth century to describe fictions that were about fiction writing or fiction reading; or that were self-reflective of the fictional worlds created in them and of the book objects that contained them. I reemphasize Patricia Waugh’s proposition that metafiction is a narrative tendency not just on the side of fiction creation, but apropos new media, on the recreation and the experience of fiction. Because many narrative fictions are now being done on multiple interactive media, mental and textual reader participation now happens in an actual fashion. Interstory is a narrative instantiation of these five threads.

Interstory is a global narrative constituted of a network of story pieces published in different media and brought together by readers following the textual and media links laid out by an author or editor. I use global in this context, not as a geographical referent, but as a demarcation of the scope of the world created by interstory. The global narrative – the world of the story – takes shape contingently out of the combinations, done by readers, of its smaller components. Interstory, thus, encompasses two levels of narration: one is the small story pieces; the other – the global narrative – is the readers’ sum of them. The cohesion of interstory depends both on a narrative apparatus and on readers’ behavior that explain our deep involvement with their narrated worlds and the sociality their stories foster. The rendition of narrative in several media platforms and the construction of narrated worlds both mentally and literally make us actual participants in a story’s creation. I offer ample theoretical background to explain each of the five threads in the thesis, but they all come together through the concept of interstory in the exploration of the case study.
I begin Chapter 1 with a defense of the study of narrative and fiction in the digital context. I propose that far from dehumanizing us, digital technology is both a different instantiation of past, even ancient technologies, and a product brought about by our own human development. It is, thus, also deeply ingrained in our brain architecture and our very humanness. I touch upon the larger scale of narrative and fiction as part of our evolutionary history. Studies on the place of art and fiction have debated over their adaptive or non-adaptive character without reaching a conclusion. Nevertheless, all of the evidence gathered by the most prominent cultural-evolutionary thinkers (Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, Bryan Boyd, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides) points to the fact that narrative fiction is ubiquitous in all cultures, learned without instruction and a highly sociable and sought after activity. Much of the research on the evolutionary roots of fictional narrative has focused in its importance as simulation of possible scenarios – utopic thinking – and as practice to distinguish different levels of reality and sources of information. This process, known as metarepresentation in cognitive studies, is responsible for negotiating the source of others’ opinions and our take on it, for example, as well as events that happened in the past, plans that might be carried out in the future, who said what about whom, where and when, etc. Lisa Zunshine has described metarepresentation as the basic skill for fiction making, but it is also a navigation system for day-to-day social interactions.

The process of fiction making and the way we engage with it has been theorized, at least, since Samuel Taylor Coleridge advanced his theorization of “suspension of disbelief” in the nineteenth century. The idea has been theorized in many forms: transportation, confabulation, actualization, simulation, and entrancement, to mention only a few. In Chapter 1 I stop briefly at the most salient theorizations in order to characterize the deep emotional involvement that narrative is capable of arising. I conclude the first chapter with an examination of the theory on metafiction to extract three aspects I consider to be the premises over which this narrative tendency operates and are carried out into the concept of interstory: fictional self-consciousness and self-referentiality, thematization of the writing and reading processes, and the manifestation of the reader’s own powers and awareness of her role in the fiction making. Ultimately, I propose that metafiction accounts for the troubles of getting involved in fiction, of telling apart the world of fiction from the real one: our concern with
the closeness and vulnerability we feel towards fiction that make stories such an important part of our lives.

In chapter 2, I continue the ideas outlined above in the context of digital media and media convergence. The main purpose of this chapter is to translate the terms and concepts applicable to a general notion of narrative in human history to the particular context of the digital age. The transition of reading from book to digital media and extreme preconceived ideas about it, both positive and negative, are also surveyed. Once again, the goal is to view narrative produced in our times through various different media as a stage that simultaneously continues and revolutionizes past traditions. From there, I move on to explore the two main concepts behind interstory: intermediality and media convergence. Intermediality is presented as the complementary interrelation, transgression, intersection and interaction among media in a single work. Media convergence is also a form of media amalgamation that takes into account the individual and social practices attached to particular instances.

From my discussion of intermediality and media convergence I advance a three-layer concept of medium that allows me to characterize interstory. Medium is presented as semiotic material, the channel or technology of communication through which it is rendered and the set of practices associated with them. This concept accepts that interactions between media can occur at any of the three layers and, consequently, should lend itself to flexible characterizations of the many distinct phenomena going on in our times such as remediation and hypermediation. I take these two phenomena as examples of intermedial and convergent processes recurrent in art and literature throughout history, which have, nonetheless, become even more pervasive in our current context. Moreover, both remediation and hypermediation, are conductive of self-referentiality and, as a result, of metafictional practices. Another important concept is interactivity. Taken as a form of reader participation and involvement with the narrative, interactivity is proposed as a mental process of narrative engagement that gets potentially realized by the particular affordances of digital media. Towards the end of Chapter 2, I advance the idea that due to their participatory, intermedial, convergent and interactive qualities, narratives produced in our current media ecology are increasingly gearing towards self-referentiality, self-consciousness and, in turn, to metafictionality.
In chapter 3 I present the detailed definition of interstory based on the three-layer concept of medium outlined before. Each of its characteristics: global and narrative fragments, reader participation, multiple mediality, structure, self-reflexivity and metafictionality is to be elaborated in light of Hernán Casciari’s and Christian Basilis’ *Orsai*. *Orsai* is an undisputable product of media convergence and has grouped under the same narrative, three blogs, a print magazine, a publishing house and a bar. Casciari and Basilis are in charge of writing the majority of blog posts, but over a hundred guest authors have collaborated in the print magazine. A central argument of this chapter is that even though the print magazine is the anchor project, as a matter of fact, it is *Orsai*’s story, the account of its constant developments that constitutes the most prominent narrative. Furthermore, I also suggest that the narrative of *Orsai*, and not the articles published in the magazine, is the focus of reader interest. Chapter 3 also sees the inclusion of results from computational analysis. Only network analysis is presented here to show the patterns of the network structure of *Orsai*’s narrative. This analysis shows the pervasiveness of several writing ‘genres’ that I have identified as self-referential, that is, those dealing with the inner workings of *Orsai* and, indeed, those in charge of keeping *Orsai* alive. Even though it is an actual project, *Orsai* is highly narrativized and fictionalized. Self-referential texts, present in all of the project’s media, keep the cohesion of the global narrative and characterize the overall metafictional tone of the project.

Chapter 4 is devoted to *Orsai*’s readers and the online community formed around the project. I initially describe the parameters of what constitutes a reader in the abstract model of the database, not as someone who reads *Orsai*, but someone who comments on any of the three blogs or the web magazine. From there I launch an exploration of the patterns of interaction that show different kinds of reader engagement as measured initially from the amount of comments left on each post in the four platforms that allow it. More refined analyses look into commentary depth, and the kind of content they carry, from the short congratulatory and thankful comments, to the much longer readers’ own literary production and critique. Measures of life-span of posts as indicated by the latest comments left on them also show very distinct forms of reader interaction in each media. Analysis of the reader network indicates strong preference for the posts and episodes relating to *Orsai*’s own media developments, and shows that the self-referential, metafictional aspects of the project are,
indeed, the most attractive to readers. Self-referential texts as mentioned above are indeed those in charge of selling the project and promoting each new media development. Consequently, actual involvement frequently required in these posts, like subscribing to the magazine or supporting its distribution, might be the reason why readers are also more responsive. Towards the end of Chapter 4, a targeted analysis of word frequency distribution is carried out with the objective of digging deeper into reader self-consciousness and it, indeed, shows that much of the exchanges going on in the comments sections of the blogs are about *Orsai* itself.

Because of digital media and the rapidly changing dynamics in our current media ecology, narratives will likely never be the same they were fifteen or twenty years ago. Nevertheless as I propose in this thesis, this does not mean that the narratives created in our times and taking advantage of computer mediated communications, participatory platforms as well as print materials are incapable of causing experiences analogous to those created on print media exclusively. I have no doubt that we are currently living a transitional time and that narrative manifestations like interstory are but another step in the long history of storytelling. Instances like *Orsai*, for as valuable and paradigm changing as they might be, will continue to be reconfigured. It is impossible to make predictions of what will happen next. Even a single project like *Orsai* tends to instability and rapid changes. A snapshot understanding of how narratives are being rendered at this precise moment, like this thesis, might shed light not only into what comes next, but also into what has come before. Ultimately, the success of *Orsai*, and likely other instances of interstory, can be attributed to the sense of prosociality fostered by cultural products like narrative.
Chapter 1

1 On Fiction

Stories make us human. This axiomatic expression has been repeated so much and in so many and different contexts that it has stopped to make us wonder whether there is any truth behind it. I think there is. Nevertheless, for it to be true we have to think of “stories” together with, but separate from the medium that materializes them, be it a print book, an oral performance, or a film. Narrative fiction is not exclusive to books or to literature. Stories and different forms of fiction are everywhere: in planning and remembering, at play, and in conversation. Stories also happen all the time and, though we might not notice, we construct stories of ourselves, and out of every event, action, and even objects. We make sense and organize what goes on around us through stories. As a species we have learned to explain the world to ourselves through stories and continue to do so, perhaps even more urgently, in our rapid and confusing informational age. On this basis, I would like to establish the larger theoretical frame informing this study. I argue that the bases of narrative fiction remain the same in terms of our larger human history, cognition, evolution and social dynamics, even though they might now come in a digital, convergent or intermedial disguise.

The study of narrative fiction in the digital era, therefore, does need to take into account two aspects: that we are living a disruptive and radical shift in terms of means of publication, writing, and reading apropos the popularization of the Internet; and that the human drive to share stories has its origin in our farther past and has been shaped by our evolved cognitive architecture. Although in many ways we are living through a digital revolution, the digital turn of the last few decades can be considered one among many revolutionary media and technological shifts shaping human history and, along with it, the history of narrative. The development of writing, paper, rolls, codex, and the movable type printing press are examples of media shifts. While all of these developments have had a larger impact on human development as Walter Ong argues in Orality and Literacy, they have maintained an especially close relationship with how stories are told, affecting how they have been created, distributed and received through centuries.
In this chapter, I bring together evolutionary studies, cognitive science, and literary theory with the purpose of elaborating an interdisciplinary conceptualization of story and fiction away from the more fixed idea of book and literature and closer to a mode of relating socially to others as well as to the world and the worlds in stories. The chapter is divided into five sections. In the first one I offer a defense of digitality and the study of narrative in the context of the debate surrounding “the posthuman”. Largely, this is also a defense of interdisciplinarity and the consilience of science and the humanities that seeks to offer the base approach to the whole thesis and contextualize the inclusion of insights coming from the natural sciences. Next, I survey the most salient evolutionary proposals regarding the fundamental place of fiction in our history as a species. Section three deals with the development of cognitive skills that make fiction possible and why we feel it as close to us as a live experience. In the fourth section I move on to explore ways in which readers become immersed in fictional narratives and learn to navigate the different worlds proposed by stories. Finally, the last section deals with metafiction as it has been proposed in literary theory. I reelaborate its relevance as a literalization of all the underlying cognitive non-conscious processes that make fiction possible as well as the deep involvement of the reader with narrative.

Already, it might be noticeable that I intend to use the terms ‘fiction’, ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ over that of ‘literature’. The reason for this is that ‘literature’ has been used for several centuries to refer mostly to a quite specific type of written language and, as we move closer to the present, increasingly to a particular kind of polished, published, print creation. Fiction and story are bigger than this and at the same time ingrained in it, or as Brian Boyd would have it, “storytelling lies at the heart of literature” (Origin 10). References to literature (and thus writing and reading) will, however, be present throughout due to my use of literary and narrative theory, most of which has been born out of the study of print stories. The rationale of the terminological choices is to establish a larger category of story/narrative and of fiction regardless of the media in which it is rendered. Evidence of this is how they have gone hand in hand with human development much before the development of written language and, as we are currently witnessing, continue past the age of Gutenberg’s press and beyond a concept of literature. Unless
specified, in most instances my use of *story, narrative, and storytelling* are synonymous – storytelling emphasizing the processual aspect of it. *Fiction*, however, is used as a function or a quality of them. Similarly, I allow myself the use of *reader* in an flexible manner to refer to the individual *re*-creating a narrative regardless of its media.

### 1.1 A Defense Of The Digital In The Context Of Narrative

It is impossible to deny that we are in the midst of a media revolution. For a few decades now digital media has been exerting its influence in the way we communicate, shop, move around the streets, watch television, listen to the radio, read books, and create art and narratives. The rapid technological shifts we are witnessing in the twenty-first century might mislead us into believing that artistic creations mediated by computers are drifting away from our humanness and are, consequently, becoming less an expression of our human potential and more the result of technological obsession. It is also impossible to deny that art and narrative, literature among them too, are adapting to new platforms and adopting new materialities. Their relevance, however, is by no means at stake as they continue to thrive and we continue to be fascinated, involved, and stimulated by them.

The ‘move’ of the human to an increasingly technologically mediated way of life has been the source of both rejection and cheerful reception and, from both extremes, proposed as a departure from old human constraints and values.

Post-humanism is a largely debated term and has been associated with many different schools sharing perhaps only one thing, the questioning and critique of what has historically, especially since the Renaissance, been considered human. On the one hand, there have been the political expressions of this questioning as seen in, for example, Feminism and Post-Colonial Studies. On the other hand, most relevant to this study, technological post-humanism focuses on the interactions of the human and the developing technology. What is under debate in this approach is the supposed shrinking of the autonomy, rationality, and free will characteristic of the concept of the human at the center of the universe in classical Humanism. Our increasing closeness to technology
and new scientific discoveries shedding light on what constitutes humanity have been changing our ideas on the construction of subjectivity for some time now. Within the notion of post-humanism dealing with human-technology relations, there are two contesting attitudes towards the “posthuman”. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) Katherine Hayles characterizes them as fear and pleasure. On the side of fear is the apocalyptic idea of “‘post’ with its dual connotation of superseding the human and coming after it” (283). On the other hand, the attitude of pleasure poses the posthuman as “the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means” (285). Because they are distinctively human expressions, art and story are central to this debate. Their manifestations extend well beyond a particular period in human history and, as a consequence, provide an ideal arena to explore up to what extent expressions of humanness are contingent on available means. Nevertheless, the specific means used to render these expressions do not grant or take away their humanness. Narrative fiction, thus, should be studied as a human trait beyond cultures, time, and media and, in the face of our current technological shift, we should seek precisely to offer a new perspective on its *longue durée* features.

Underlying the negative attitudes towards the posthuman is the liberal humanistic point of view. Technological advances, especially since the second half of the twentieth century with the cyborg and other intelligent machines as its ultimate expression, have been tinted with a sense of negativity and conceptualized as prosthesis not only of the human body, but also of the mind. The implication is that the human can be transformed, transcended, and even eliminated by technological developments. Although many technological objects such as networked mobile devices have become part of our daily lives, we are far from being transcended by technology. Furthermore, our current understanding of embodied and extended cognition and cognitive architecture makes

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1 Embodied and extended cognition are two interlinked notions that defy the widely held assumption that cognitive process take place exclusively inside the mind. Instead, cognition is seen as supported by the environment. Embodied and extended cognition happen as we engage in the manipulation of materials or objects that, in turn, affect how we combine and develop ideas. See Edwin Hutchins, Andy Clark, and Antonio Damasio.
this view obsolete and partial. By means of extended cognition we are capable of thinking through technology, but not exclusively in any particular way because of it. Moreover, extended cognition is not restricted to electronic or intelligent machines, but also takes place through simpler technologies like pencil and paper, books, mechanical tools, etc.

Still following Hayles, theorizations about the meeting of the mind with the body and of the individual with the environment have been gaining currency in recent decades. Far from threatening humanistic ideals or signaling the end of the human, these approaches lay the ground for thinking about the human from more thorough perspectives: mind is always supported by a body, and bodies are surrounded by an environment. The posthuman, Hayles says, “does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (Posthuman 286, emphasis mine). New ways of thinking about the human that include the environment we inhabit with all its technological developments and our cognitive architecture hold the promise of shedding light on our conventional understanding of, for example, story and literature and how they are both similar and very different.

Hayles’s theorization of the posthuman, based on the notion of the human as embodied being, leads her to draw on evolutionary biology to ground the argument that our current technological moment, as impressive as it might seem, is but a moment in our larger human history. “The body”, says Hayles, “is the net result of thousands of years of

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2 Cognitive architecture is a term I have borrowed from Lisa Zunshine and Patrick Colm Hogan. In biocultural studies cognitive architecture refers initially to the anatomical configuration of our brain in which different mental processes are carried our by different specialized areas. Although the cognitive configuration has been stable in the past several thousand years, its flexible architecture allows the development of new skills and is thus a factor contributing to cultural changes.
sedimented evolutionary history, and it is naive to think that this history does not affect human behaviors at every level of thought and action” (284). The notion of the posthuman proposed by this thread of post-humanism then is one grounded in its social, natural, and technological environments, in its particular time, and the result of a larger historical and evolutionary process. My discussion of the evolutionary and cognitive aspects of fiction draws from this premise.

At least since the development of language, story has had a ubiquitous presence throughout human history. Whatever phenomena may be developing in the age of information regarding narrative and fiction constitutes a new incarnation of other developments that were tackled and mediated differently in the recent and distant past. The fact that currently electronic media has become a powerful vehicle for stories by no means makes storytelling take a direction opposing the human. In digital media, we are still capable of experiencing fiction as closely as in other media, even if a computer or another device mediates our engagement with it. Stories persist in this age and time and are willfully adapted to the means of expression and communication newly available, just as it was to any other media available at other times in history. Though it is true that digital technologies bring about a radical change in the scope of human communication, it is undeniable that such technologies, at least when it comes to narrative and fiction, still respond to ancestral concerns and fill primeval voids. This feature points to a human need to narrate to others that has easily translated to digital media.

In our current context, the Web 2.0 has become an environment of interaction where various kinds of human creation are developed, distributed, and received. Taken to the extreme in virtual reality environments, where we have the potential of being, as an avatar, whoever we wish to, the issue of embodiment and media is more relevant than ever. Even though alternative identities, a form of extended embodiment, are present in most online contexts, cyborg fantasies of living through a machine are far from being fulfilled because of the popularization of the Internet. The highly fictional MMORPG’s (massive multiplayer online role playing games) come closer to it, but the majority of human machine interactions have not been as extreme as those fantasized with in Hans Moravec’s *The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*, or even Ray Bradbury’s “The
Veldt”. Still, extended identities online have laid the ground for new ways of relating to others. As a matter of fact, for the past decade or so, intelligent machines have been the medium facilitating new forms of human interaction as well as creative production, up to the point where, as David Ceccheto would say, “the signs of technological posthumanism have become so ubiquitous that we have ceased to take notice” (4). The seeming naturalization of technology in our times should not be seen as a decrease in our humannets, but taken as an indication that it does provide a fitting solution to a given shared problem whether it is storytelling or human communication. As Jonathan Gottschall points out “[t]he virtual world is in important ways more authentically human than the real world. It gives us back community, a feeling of competence, and a sense of being an important person whom people depend on” (196). As paradoxical as it may seem, technologies mediating human interaction remain largely human and, I maintain, the pervasiveness of narratives and stories all over the Internet is proof of this. New networked media is a good fit for story, for its creation and, especially, for sharing it. Just like other technologies – print, film, television, radio or oral tradition – have fulfilled these purposes before, digital media is currently offering attractive and rather successful means of telling stories.

Although the perception of what constitutes human may be changing apropos digital media, storytelling in the networked age carries its “remains” (Badmington 12). These “remains” of the human, far from being just a hint of what it once was, are human constants, that which has persisted and made storytelling possible from its origins. Human craving of stories and our capacity to create them and recreate them can be traced to our evolutionary history. The “remains” of story in this context are deeply ingrained in our cognitive and biological architecture. The idea of “remains” is thus parallel to the driving power behind technogenesis. Technogenesis holds two tenets. On the one hand, the idea that humans have evolved alongside with the technologies and tools we have developed progressively as iterating solutions to a recurrent problem or need. On the other hand, technogenesis is the basis of embodied and extended cognition, that is, the way we cannot remain unaffected by the environment around us of which tools are a part. To further characterize technogenesis, I turn to Katherine Hayles’ work again. In How
Hayles builds upon the concept of coevolution between humans and technology. The first implication of this theorization is that humans have developed technology according to their current capacities and the surrounding environment; and the use of those technologies, in turn, has had a transformative power on human skills and the landscape we inhabit. The result of this is a constant loop developing new solutions for old problems in order to provide a fitter solution to a pressing issue; “attention is an essential component of technical changes… for it creates from a background of technical ensembles some aspect of their physical characteristics upon which to focus, thus bringing into existence a new materiality that then becomes the context for technological innovation” (103). As a consequence, the concepts of both humans and technological objects are, at any time in history, in constant construction, revision, and under challenge. Hayles proposes that technological objects are not fixed but exist within a “complex temporality” since they emerge out of a technical ensemble: the context including geographical, social, technological, political and economical forces in which any technical development is embedded (90). More importantly, this is not a static process; on the contrary, technological objects are “always on the move, towards new configurations, new milieu, and new kinds of technical ensembles” (89). Technical objects reach, as Adrian McKenzie calls it, a “metastability”, a provisional solution to a problem that had been temporarily solved in the past and will be temporarily solved again in the future, each time reconfiguring the technical ensemble leading to further innovation but never fully leaving behind its predecessors. The “remains” are this way of stretching back to what humans have created in the past.

Hayles locates the relevance of technology within a larger timeframe of human history in which technical objects and humans have coevolved. Hayles also proposes that technical objects are temporary solutions to larger problems or needs that get reelaborated time and again. In an iterative dynamic, technical objects bear the traces of its predecessors and anticipate those that will follow. Coming back to the subject of this thesis, this begs the questions: what are the larger problems or needs being (temporarily) solved by any storytelling technology? The need to tell stories is only part of the answer. Nonetheless, I want to advance a preliminary one: any writing, reading, and distribution technology of
stories becomes most current when it maximizes its reach, involving as many participants as possible, building up a community around a story, and setting off a social dynamic that keeps the story alive. A similar claim is made by Gottschall regarding the ‘end of the novel’, but applicable to storytelling in general: “[w]e were creatures of story before we had novels, and we will be creatures of story if sawed-off attention spans or technological advances render the novel obsolete. Story evolves, like a biological organism, it continuously adapts itself to the demands of its environment” (180). Having so many different options, it should seem more evident in our time than ever before that the demands of the environment are not just dictated by the availability of technologies, but more than anything else by people’s choices, which they adopt and develop for narrative and other purposes alike. In the past, similar technological shifts have been mistakenly viewed as opposing extremes of the equation: oral tradition and written language, either manuscript or print, were for too long considered opposing technologies (Ong 10-12) when, in fact, they coexisted for many centuries complementing each other. Even though my work in this thesis does not directly address the debate of the “end of the book”, I do want to propose, first, that networked digital technologies are fulfilling the need to create, share, and keep stories alive quite efficiently at the moment, perhaps at a scale we had never seen before; and, second, that this, more than the disappearance of older storytelling media, implies an addition to the collection.

1.2 The Evolution Of Story And Fiction

The discussion on narrative and the technologies through which we have created and recreated it over our whole human history begets other questions: What is narrative for? Why does it matter? And how has it evolved in consideration to technological developments? As outlined by Brian Boyd in his ambitious The Origin of Storytelling (2010), an evolutionary take on the history of story helps explain “why we feel compelled to tell and listen to stories, why we can understand them so readily, why they are formed as they are, why they treat what they do in human nature, and why they continue to break new ground” (3). Furthermore, the fact that regardless of what media are used, similar
practices of storytelling are so widespread in all cultures speaks of the deep roots it has in our biology, our cognitive processes and basic social dynamics. In their article “Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Towards and Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction and the Arts”, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides launch their exploration of aesthetics, fiction and evolutionary psychology acknowledging that “involvement in fictional, imagined worlds appears to be a cross-culturally universal, species-typical phenomenon” (7). Although it is impossible to talk about the function of story, we can see some of the functions it has had throughout history, and as I suggest later in this chapter, the existence of certain story types like metafiction.

Evolutionary studies have seen fiction as a fundamental human trait. This notwithstanding, the fact that it “appears to be an intrinsically rewarding activity, without apparent utilitarian payoff” (Tooby and Cosmides, “Minds,” 8 emphasis mine) makes fiction resistant to a straightforward Darwinian explanation. Moreover, the fact that story is so ubiquitous, and naturally acquired makes it even more puzzling for evolutionists.

The place of fiction and other imaginative manifestations have occupied a central place in evolutionary studies as expressions of the human mind and its behavioral manifestations. In literary studies, however, this approach has not been as easily incorporated. Following Brian Boyd, I believe that a biocultural approach to literature constitutes an “extensive” way of explaining the existence of art and, more specifically, fiction, an approach that goes beyond the historical circumstances of any given creative endeavor. Echoing the idea of post humanism elaborated before, this approach is bound to offer new conceptualizations of literature as part of the longer human imperative to narrate that has been shaped and reshaped by the developments of our mind as much as by technological ones.

An important clarification that must accompany this approach is the fact that an evolutionary or cognitive view of the mechanisms underlying fictional and other creative practices does not entail a deterministic and universalistic approach to human culture. This elucidation is important because, unlike evolutionary scholars, it may not be so apparent to humanities experts. As a matter of fact, as Boyd clarifies, “[t]he extent of human cultural differences has been made possible by the evolution of the mind” (Origin
Similarly, Norman Holland in his anthological *Literature and the Brain*, sustains: “our biology both enables us and limits us. Our brains are part of that biology, and our brains enable us to create and re-create literature” (4). Along the same line, in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, Richard Gerrig assures that “all a reader must do to be transported to a narrative world is to have in place the repertory of cognitive processes that is otherwise required for everyday experience” (239). Along with them, I argue that our evolutionary history and cognitive architecture are the large-scale canvas where individual creative potential is realized.

A biocultural approach constitutes a rather radical change in the way we have looked at particular instantiations of narrative, more concretely literature, as the product of an individual genius, to become a manifestation of human nature coming out of our minds shaped by evolution and our ancestral way of relating to others as much as from our cultural history. Then again, this approach does not disregard the practice of focused, close reading literary criticism as we know it. In her introduction to *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (2012), Nancy Easterlin proposes a practice of biocultural theory and interpretation that “combin[es] cultural, historical and literary analysis within a cognitive-evolutionary framework” (x). Just as I have argued before, a biocultural approach too offers an exciting opportunity to see old problems in a new light and in a larger scale that allows us to carry out particularized analysis of specific texts through a different frame.

Evolutionary studies have opened very exciting avenues to answer question about the function of narrative and its importance in human history more fully: story and fiction are human features ingrained in our *big history* as a species. Nevertheless, that is not the complete answer. As Tooby and Cosmides examine, whether art and fiction constitute adaptations properly – performing “a function that ultimately contributed to genetic propagation” (“Minds,” 6-10) – or a byproduct of them – with no function of its own is one of the most controversial. Steven Pinker has pushed the byproduct theory. His very often-cited metaphor of “cheesecake” for the mind characterizes art as a cognitive surplus that takes advantage of functional adaptations originally designed for other purposes (525). Human fascination with art according to Pinker can be explained by the pleasure it
elicits by “picking the locks” or using other cognitive adaptations in a “test mode”. To support his theory:

Pinker sketched out how many well-known features of the visual arts, music, and literature, take advantage of design features of the mind that were targets of selection not because they caused enjoyment of the arts, but because they solved other adaptive problems such as interpreting visual arrays, understanding language or negotiating the social world. (Tooby and Cosmides, “Minds,” 11 emphasis mine)

The interesting implication of the byproduct theory is that more than equipped to create and recreate art and fiction, humans are vulnerable to it. This is, however, one of the most recurrent reasons why Pinker’s theory continues to be questioned and reelaborated time and again. Within the reigning evolutionary functionalist logic, art involvement is resource expensive, which would make it detrimental to survival and, as a consequence, disappear through millennia of natural selection. Still, the cheesecake theory does not go against positing fiction as a deeply human trait.

Although largely taken as the default one, Pinker’s theory has not been totally satisfactory for evolutionary scientists who see the universality of storytelling as a token of its origins as a functional adaptation. Tooby and Cosmides assert that “the human mind is permeated by an additional layer of adaptations that were selected to involve humans in aesthetic experience and imagined worlds, even though these activities superficially appear to be nonfunctional and even extravagantly nonutilitarian” (“Minds,” 11). Brian Boyd shares this view and has heavily contested Pinker’s view by pointing out that the cheesecake metaphor applies, only partly, to the consumption, but not the production of art, which requires the investment of many more resources than just its enjoyment. “If”, Boyd states, “art involved no benefit, if it only mimicked biological advantage… by delivering unearned pleasure, yet it had high costs in time, energy, and resources, then a predisposition to art would be a weakness that would long ago have been weeded out by the intensity of evolutionary competition” (Origin 83). Furthermore, Boyd defends the adaptive character of fiction building on the fact that a "sign of cognitive adaptation is that limited perceptual input, yields rich conceptual output: the mind automatically processes information in elaborate ways. In fiction we repeatedly
make inferences that far outstrip evidence" (*Origin* 189).

Although the fundamental adaptive function of fiction is still under debate it has become accepted that story is at the heart of our humanity and that our attraction to fiction separates us from all other species. Story also has a social and even documentary relevance, and that makes it “the great repository of our detailed knowledge of human nature in the past. It will be illuminated by, and it will illuminate, our knowledge of an even deeper past” (Boyd, *Origin* 41). Concerns about the demise of literature in the digital age weaken in light of this, since media – in this or any other time in history – do not seem determinant for the existence of story. As we well know, “before these technologies [film, television, internet] existed, novels and stories were hungrily consumed by large proportions of the literate population [and] among hunter-gatherers, stories are commonly told around the fire” (Tooby and Cosmides, “Minds,” 8). Story has evolved and changed according to other human developments. The digital turn might be a revolution but it is also another point in our evolutionary, cognitive, technological, and storytelling histories.

My proposal on the creation, distribution and reception of fiction in digital media, stems from and is an addition to both the technogenesis and the biocultural approaches. On the one hand, this work relies on the widely accepted notion that fiction constitutes a creation and recreation, through diverse cognitive processes, of a world different from, yet very close to, our own. Added to this is the fact that digital networked media provides distinct possibilities for the creation of other worlds and thus affect the materiality of story and the way we engage with it. On the other hand, the worldwide reach of digital media is also revolutionizing the function of literature as a social instrument in as much as it favors the creation of communities and social interaction never seen until now. In fact, although there is still much suspicion towards new technologies, I propose that the place of storytelling in our digital age remains largely the same it has been throughout our evolutionary history. As Gottschall would put it, “stories give us pleasure and instruction. They simulate worlds so we can live better in this one. They help bind us into communities and define us as cultures” (197). Viewed this way, storytelling is evolving along with us and the technology we produce. This does not mean the end of story in its
most basic sense, but it does mean that digital media shifts will be reshaping the ways in which we build fictional worlds and how we come to inhabit them.

1.3 The Cognition of Narrative and Fiction

Another set of questions originating from this approach to narrative and fiction is how exactly do we get so deeply engaged in narrative and why such engagement is so pervasive throughout human cultures. Because I largely deal with metafiction in this thesis, the answers to the latter question will have an emphasis on the capacity for creating worlds other than our ‘real’ one in which we project ourselves and participate in various degrees. Up to now, several approaches have been made to the issue of fictionalization mostly from psychology and neuroscience and cognitive science, and an array of mechanisms of how this occurs have been proposed: metarepresentation, blending, world-making, theory of mind, simulation model, among others. They all share a basic outlook: the fact that it is the same mind dealing with everyday ‘real’ information that produces fiction and story.

According to Lisa Zunshine, all of the processes involved in storytelling are carried out unconsciously because they are part of our “evolved cognitive architecture” (
Introduction 7). In other words, they need not be learned, and because they are so deeply rooted in our minds, these processes necessarily have an effect in the way storytelling is rendered in new technologies. Any new media used for storytelling is adapted to suit and take advantage of the cognitive processes that have ancestrally been employed to deal with narrative and fiction. Therefore, far from seeing the new renderings literature and storytelling are having in the digital age as threats to our humanistic cathedrals, we are now facing a perfect opportunity to view, study, and understand them as a continuation of past ones and to observe the interactions and responses, individual and social, they are eliciting. Not only do these observations shed light on our current cultural phenomena but might also contribute to understanding functions of art and literature that may have gone previously unnoticed.
Cognitive psychology and linguistics have developed parallel to evolutionary studies focused on art and storytelling, and have also shed much light on these problems. In literary studies, psychoanalytic approaches were common before that, but as Isabel Jaén explains, it was not until the 1990’s when the interdisciplinary work produced “reconnect[ed] the human mind with its biology and environment” (2). In the early 1990's, the work of Reuven Tsur was, no doubt, instrumental in outlining the concerns and premises of the budding interdisciplinary field. The first concern was how cognitive-literary approaches were to “illuminate literature rather than use works of literature to illustrate cognitive theories” (1), that is, how cognitive-literary studies were to maintain their literary focus. Tsur’s approach in *Towards a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992) rested on the fact that the processes at work in the reception of literature – his work focuses on poetry – are not only led by cognitive mechanisms but also by aesthetic ones.

A parallel endeavor, Mark Turner’s *Reading Mind* (1991) advocated for the study of literature based on language as a product of the human mind. For him, the focus should be on “how the embodied human mind uses its ordinary conceptual capacities to perform… acts of language and literature (6). Similar to Tsur’s, Turner’s initial approach to literature relied mostly on cognitive linguistics and its most salient concepts such as mental spaces, schemas, categorization, blending, and metaphor and metonymy.

Tsur’s and Turner’s work paved the way for a renewed understanding of literature that aimed to revolutionize its study as well as conventional academic practices in the field – then at the peak of poststructuralism and critical theory. Their approaches, however, had two major differences: first Tsur was much more involved in the creation of poetic discourse, while Turner devoted his work to the reception of narrative. Secondly, Tsur foresaw that a cognitive approach would reveal that some “central poetic effects are the result of some drastic interference with, or at least delay of, the regular course of cognitive processes, and the exploitation of its effects for aesthetic purposes” (4). In contrast, for Turner the language of literature is deeply connected to human history and practices and not that different from everyday happenings or language: “structures of language supposedly poetic are ubiquituous and irreducible in everyday language” (20). It would seem that Tsur’s approach, although based on language as a product of the mind,
was still very much prejudiced by the idea of ‘high’ literature. This fact may have prevented him from seeing all the parallels with less ‘refined’ forms of verbal expressions. Turner, on the other hand, even at a time when fMRI and other technologies were not fully developed or applied to research on reading and fiction making, was able to intuit the universality and pervasiveness of the kind of discourse and cognitive processes out of which both everyday utterances and narrative fiction are made.

It is very telling that from different fields, like intuitions have been proposed regarding the creation of fictional worlds and our involvement with them. The fact that comparable insights have emerged from both evolutionary and cognitive studies only strengthens the case for the unbreakable bond between our deepest mental processes and the production of fiction. An evolutionary and cognitive understanding of literature and fiction should help us understand not only the mechanisms at play when engaging in a story. In my view it should also offer insights for us to understand the pervasiveness of certain story types like the *bildungsroman*, heroic narratives, the utopian story, and metafiction. Gottschall refers to this as the “problem structure” and refers to the fact that fiction is, necessarily, full of conflict. There is no story without conflict, and interestingly, fiction has always been like this and continues to be so in our age of reality television and blog ‘hoaxes’. “The problem structure reveals a major function of storytelling. It suggests that the human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by story” (Gottschall 56). Fiction in this view is a simulation of life conflict and provides scenarios on which to test our minds to deal with them.

In his research on film viewing, neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni discovered that, “our brains recreate for us the distress we see on the screen. We have empathy for the fictional characters – we know how they’re feeling – because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves” (4 emphasis mine). Iacoboni’s assertion makes it very clear why we experience fiction in such an involved way, as a simulation of our own life, emotions and experiences. Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar also maintain that the function of fiction is social simulation. “Simulation”, they say, “is related to narrative fiction in two distinct ways. The first is that consumers of literary stories experience thoughts and emotions congruent with the events represented by these narratives” (173). For Oatley and Mar,
however, the narrative scope of simulation does not end there:

literary narratives are related to simulation [because] stories model and abstract the human social world. Like other simulations (e.g., computer models), fictional stories are informative in that they allow for prediction and explanation while revealing the underlying processes of what is being modeled (in this case, social relations). Understanding stories as simulations can help explain why they provide a special kind of experience. The abstraction performed by fictional stories demands that readers and others project themselves into the represented events. The function of fiction can thus be seen to include the recording, abstraction, and communication of complex social information in a manner that offers personal enactments of experience, rendering it more comprehensible than usual. Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it. (173)

The simulation approach to fiction can offer an interesting look at what has commonly been referred to as a genre: metafiction. Metafiction, I want to advance, is a kind of fiction that deals with fiction itself. Among others, the one outstanding characteristic of metafiction is that it oscillates between the world of the fiction and that of the reader. Metafiction points in the direction of the place of a story in the real world and the involvement of a real reader with it. It can be argued that metafiction fulfills a didactic function where we can try momentarily the implications of getting too involved, or even fooled by fiction – or in the real world by false information. I propose that the “conflict”, in Gottschall’s terms, in metafictional stories is the very process of fictionalization on both the part of the author and the reader, i.e. the creation of a narrated world where they both can interact over the ‘pretext’ of a story. The gap between the fictional world and the real world posited by all fiction – and made even more explicit in metafiction – is too a concern of evolutionary literary studies.

The issue of fictionality and its supposed opposition to true information has been approached as a clever way to discuss the relevance of story in evolutionary terms. This approach sets off from the functionalist assumption that only true information would be of value in survival competition. The resources invested in fictional information, as non-true information, would play against individuals involved in it. Furthermore, this view would mean that true information should be infinitely more valued than non-true or
fictional ones because it leads to adequate action in the environment. Nevertheless, fictional and other imaginative sorts of information have not only kept their place through centuries, but also continue to occupy a very prominent position in our daily lives regardless of the most current medium at any given time. Both Boyd and Tooby and Cosmides agree that people have a preference for fictional narratives, which proves wrong the apparently more logical attraction to true information. In fact, still in our so-called information age, people are usually more drawn to fictional rather than true stories (Boyd Origin 130). And indeed despite all the factual information found on the Internet, it remains largely an entertainment channel. In general, a distinction of our species is that people, Tooby and Cosmides argue, “remain intensely interested in communications that are explicitly marked as false” (“Minds,” 12). The issue arising out of this is precisely the process through which we distinguish ‘true’ from ‘false’ and everything in between, how we learn to do it, and whether or not we engage differently with each one.

1.4 Fictional Involvement

The involvement of a reader with a work of literature has always been a concern of literary theory though in different degrees depending on a given period. For a long time, the emphasis was put largely on the author as the source of a story and its ultimate explanation. This view was dramatically contested in Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1968), and more steadily since the advent of Reader Response Theory and the cognitive turn in literary studies. Still, in literary history, the foundational referent of reader involvement is, perhaps, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief”. Coleridge’s proposition, specifically intended for the supernatural and fantastic elements of his own work, has turned into a basis for thinking about the reading process and the standing of fiction in the real world. Richard Gerrig has worked extensively over Coleridge’s theorization, and has taken willing suspension of disbelief “to stand for some cluster of special processes that readers are supposed to undertake when they know themselves to be experiencing fiction. If we contrast fiction and nonfiction, the implication is that there is a toggling back and forth between suspension
and nonsuspension of disbelief” (Holland, *Brain* 64). Interestingly, however, it is undeniable that Coleridge imagined a picture of an active reader. A completely passive take on the act of reading would imply a reader who is malleable and completely vulnerable to the author’s most eccentric whims; it would not require the reader to willingly suspend her disbelief. Even if Coleridge's idea of willingness suggested a much more conscious process of fictional involvement than it actually is, at its foundation, he seems to be imagining an active reader, one who is bringing some of her own background and expectations into the literary work.

Research focusing on the mechanisms making the sifting of true and fictional information has undoubtedly confirmed that there is much overlapping between the two and that their supposedly ontological divide is culturally constructed. Studies on memory, lie-blindness, counterfactuality, and confabulation have been instrumental for this conclusion. Memory studies suggest that over time even true information becomes inexact and is interfered with other data. Flashbulb memory research, for example, convincingly shows the effect of time on altering memories and suggested that memory is but a reconstruction of actual events (Gottschal 162-169). Lie-blindness, largely studied by Daniel T. Gilbert, is proposed as the automatic acceptance of everything we perceive, which we come to doubt only on second thought. Norman Holland cites Natalie Angier summarizing this field of research:

> In more than 100 studies, researchers have asked participants questions like, Is the person on the videotape lying or telling the truth? Subjects guess correctly about 54 percent of the time, which is barely better than they'd do by flipping a coin. Our lie blindness suggests to some researchers a human desire to be deceived, a preference for the stylishly accoutered fable over the naked truth. (*Brain* 62)

To return to Coleridge, lie blindness would render willing suspension of disbelief unnecessary even in the face of a fictional story regardless of how fantastic it might be and it convincingly proves that suspension of disbelief is not something that can be turned on and off. Establishing counterfactuality is a way through which we imagine something that is not or does not exist and may wish to change, for example, where a piece of furniture is located in a room. Counterfactuality is the basic principle of
daydreaming and utopic thinking, and it resembles Pinker’s idea that products of the imagination serve as a testing tool for possible scenarios. In any case, it is the mechanism through which we blend what is and what is not. Counterfactuality is the world of possibility. Because it opens up the here-and-now to potential worlds, counterfactuality also helps distinguish true from false information, i.e. what the knowable information is and what potential instantiations it might take. As a result, counterfactuality also aids establishing links between reality levels.

Finally, confabulation is our capacity to fill in the blanks when events seem unexplainable because of our lack of crucial information equally in life as in fiction. This skill is also commonly used by all of us to make excuses, even pathologically in individuals with brain damage (Holland, Brain 71). For Gottschall, confabulation is our very own storytelling mind that provides retrospective complex explanations and stories out of only a few cues and "allows us to experience our lives as coherent, orderly, and meaningful" (102). The other side of confabulation is that "it is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence…. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them” (103). It is possible to argue that confabulation, just like memory and lie blindness, boosts our craving for stories and may actually have a fictionalizing effect on true stories, rendering them, using Gottschall's word, "truthy" (103).

Memoirs, historical films and novels, biographies, autobiographies and, more recently, blogs and reality television fall right into the “truthy” category. Stories that have a ‘true’ account underlying them manifest how brittle the boundary between real and fictional information is, but they also take advantage of it because it is easier to believe unquestionably a story when we know it to be true than when we know it is the product of someone’s imagination. Our involvement with them as an ‘all-true’ account speaks of our tendency to accept information. That a story be true or not does not affect the level of involvement we might experience through fiction. “Although fiction seems to be processed as surrogate experience, some psychological subsystems reliably react to it as if it were real, while others reliably do not” (Tooby and Cosmides, “Minds,” 8). The creation of “truthy” stories points, at best, to our unstable memory and, at worst, to the
confabulator in all of us. Since childhood, through play we fictionalize real happenings and believe, create, and even experience, fictional ones as though they were real. When we face a story and make sense of it through all these mechanisms we are carrying out a highly active pursuit without noticing it.

Ever since the publication of Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading* (1978), and the surrounding Reader Response Theories, it has been widely accepted that the text as an object is only realized when a reader engages with it. Readings, therefore, are not static because they depend on an actual reader bringing her background and horizon of expectations into the realization of the text. For Peter Stockwell, texts are artifacts, but “readings” are “natural objects” that change and evolve as they are carried out (2). The idea of a negotiation between reader and text was planted on phenomenological approaches when most of the non-conscious cognitive processes undergoing the act of reading and story recreation were unknown. Norman Holland having a strong background on Reader Response Theory has bridged gaps like this between approaches. The text, for Holland, is part of the world and because “we cannot know the world as such, [and] we know it only through our own senses with all their various biases and peculiarities” there is no possible access to the story or the poem “free from the activities of [our] brains and sense organs” (*Brain* 34). Furthermore, Holland also proposes a sort of blending process in reading: “a poem, a story, a play, or a movie occurs somehow between us and the world around us” (38).

Very closely related to this is Mark Turner’s notion of blending: a synthesis of two different realms of meaning or input spaces overlapping some of their characteristics and resulting in a third new realm of meaning. A blend is “a dynamic activity. It connects input spaces; it projects partial structure from input spaces to the blend, creating an imaginative blended space that, however odd or even impossible, is nonetheless connected to its inputs and can illuminate those inputs” (*Literary* 83). Most interesting from Turner’s notion of blending is the fact that narrative recreation constitutes a blend in itself. Following Wayne C. Booth, Turner characterizes two input spaces, the space of a story narrated and the space of the narration, and a third blended space in which “the narrator, the readers and the characters can inhabit one world” (74). It is in this third
space that reader involvement and adjacent phenomena like “entrancement” and “transportation” take place.

“Entrancement” is a kind of experience awakened by narrative and fiction and is characterized by Victor Nell as the moment when “we not only cease to be aware of self and environment, we begin to believe, to feel as real, the imaginary worlds of literatures” (Holland, Brain 58). For Holland, “getting lost”, transported, in a work of literature means the collapse of a boundary between us and the work of art:

We project the work outward from ourselves when our brains automatically translate sensations within our bodies outward into a three-dimensional text independent of our bodies. We also project into that literary work “out there”….We fill in gaps in a story. We infer the inner thoughts of characters or the parts of an environment that we cannot see.

We also merge in the other direction, however. We introject. We take in what we take to be the text’s portrayals, so that what is “out there” in the literary work feels as though it were happening “in here” in your mind or mine. (Brain 42-43)

Similarly, Gerrig proposes two mechanisms by means of which reading immersion happens: transportation – “a moving away from the immediate physical environment and relocating oneself in the fictional world”; and performance – “the activity of participating in the fictional world like an actor on a stage” (Ryan, “Electronic Age, “ 129) tapping into their own extratextual experience and giving substance to the fictional world. The idea of performance is also recurring in phenomenology, according to Iser, “literary texts initiate ‘performances’ of meaning rather than actually formulating meaning themselves” (27). The underlying reason why we are so easily involved in narrative fiction has been proposed by Tooby and Cosmides as an overlap between fictional worlds and our own:

although fiction often embeds real facts, places, events, and people, they are not necessarily or even usually marked off from the nonexistent ‘facts’… within a fictional narrative, everything (whether true in reality or not) has the same undiscriminated and largely indiscriminable standing, and all proposition are freely interwoven without the least regard to their extrinsic accuracy. (“Minds,” 13)

This paralleling of fictional and real world, doubtless, facilitates the close involvement
with narratives, but it is also a consequence of how we learn to construct stories.

Another explanation of the ease with which we become involved in stories has been to characterize fiction as an adult extension of childhood’s pretend play. Cognitive play has been an essential concept to understand the evolutionary value of storytelling and is, most likely, a solid explanation why fiction has never stopped being a central activity in all cultures. Pretend play is a symbolic kind of cognitive play. Full of stories – and thus as Gotschall would have it, conflict – pretend play can be knit into the discussion of human craving for fiction because it constitutes one of our first attempts at creating stories of our own, about us, and about the issues in our surrounding environment. Pretend play is, according to Tooby and Cosmides, a “specialized cognitive machinery that allows us to enter and *participate* in imagined worlds” (“Minds,” 9 emphasis mine). In general terms, cognitive play is rehearsal for real life. Jonathan Gotschall summarizes the work done on play: “pretend play is *for* something. It has biological functions….The most common view of play across species is that it helps youngsters rehearse for adult life. From this perspective, children at play are training their bodies and brains for the challenges of adulthood — they are building social and emotional intelligence” (41). Stories, as pretend play, are simulations and practice for real life. Echoing Mar and Oately, Gottschall sustains: “fiction allows our brains to practice reacting to the kinds of challenges that are, and always were, most crucial to our success as a species” (67).

Childhood's pretend play is parallel to our adult engagement with fiction in many ways; Tooby and Cosmides list them: "it is intrinsically rewarding, non-instrumental, and it certainly involves the mental representation of states of affairs known to be false to the individual carrying out the mental activity. Moreover, it appears to involve the same cognitive design features that protect children in pretend play from confusing fiction and reality” (“Minds,” 10). Pretend play, and fiction along with it, are safeguarded so that, unlike Don Quijote we do not end up trapped in an imagined world, or unlike Madame Bovary we do not suffer the tragic effects of fantasies. This might seem overtly simple, the ability to tell fiction from reality, and we feel protected by the possibility of going back to the real world as easily as stopping the game, putting the book down, turning the TV off, etc. In *The Reader and the Text*, Diana Sorensen Goodrich theorized “the
contract of fiction” as the capacity to tell where fiction ends, where we as readers cannot be affected by it, even in the case of highly metafictional novels of *Don Quijote* and *Madame Bovary*. Although Sorensen’s proposal is actually true, in the knowable world, I have attempted to demonstrate in my discussion that we are, indeed, deeply emotionally and mentally affected by fiction. Our involvement with stories might be safeguarded in the actual world, but it definitely is not in our mental and emotional ones.

As a matter of fact, it seems that we are very aware of how tightly we come to inhabit imagined worlds, of how emotionally vulnerable we are in them, and might even fear the possibility of being at risk of getting lost in them. I am interested in this risk because it is central to metafiction. The conventional critical take on the infiltration of the metafictional world into our own has been that it comments on the craft of making fiction, an elitist, indulgent and self concerned commentary on the author's own storytelling talents. Linda Hutcheon, for example, pairs the term narcissistic narrative to metafiction. Conversely, I suggest that metafiction can be seen as the account of the troubles of getting involved in fiction, of telling the world of fiction from the real one: our concern with the closeness and vulnerability we feel towards fiction. Apart from a commentary on the ontological divide between reality and fiction, metafiction is capable of offering ontological insights vis-à-vis the construction of fictional worlds and their place in our world.

In pretend play, as in social situations and fiction, we make the distinction between distinct layers of reality, whether from our own perspective or someone else's, and whether it comes from an imagined or a real situation, in the past, the present or the future. This ‘slicing’ of information, the automatic and apparently straightforward distinction between reality and fiction, is achieved by means of metarepresentation. In cognitive science, metarepresentation is understood as the mechanism through which we "understand readily past, present, and future; real, pretend, supposed, or counterfactual; and the perspectives of others and even their own in the past" (Boyd, *Origin* 269). Not only that, metarepresentation makes it possible to understand representations, and to understand them as representations as Boyd would have it. Through metarepresentation we assign a series of tags who/when/where/what/why to every piece of information that
locate it in a given realm of information. Tooby and Cosmides refer to metarepresentation as a system of decoupling that keeps knowledge of the real world separate from that of the fictional. Metarepresentation would not be possible without theory of mind (ToM), or mind-reading as it is also commonly referred to. ToM can be characterized as “our tendency to interpret observed behavior in terms of underlying mental states” (Zunshine, *Why 7*). The importance of ToM resides in allowing us to follow and understand, or at least intuit, what is in the mind of others (beliefs and false beliefs, assumptions, knowledge) from their actions and behavior, and make inferences out of it. Engaging in story is basically a mind reading pursuit, a mapping of everything that goes on in the fictional world. Zunshine establishes that without theory of mind the creation and reception of narrative, fictional or not, would be very difficult if not impossible.

Several years before the discovery of mirror neurons and the scholarly pairing of metarepresentation with fiction-making in the late 1990’s, in his well known study *The Literary Mind* (1996), Mark Turner made the proposition that the “human mind is essentially literary” (5) and opposed the idea that “the everyday mind has little to do with literature” (7). Turner’s theorization of “narrative imaging” was not that far away from the concept of metarepresentation. As an essential thought process, narrative imaging provides a “means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition in general” (Turner, *Literary 4-5*). Holding striking similarities to Turner’s literary mind, for Tooby and Cosmides, metarepresentation is “essential to planning, interpreting communication, employing the information communication brings, evaluating others claims, mind reading, pretense, detecting or perpetrating deception, using inference to triangulate information about the past or hidden casual relations and much else that makes the human mind so distinctive” (“Consider,” 60). In “Narrative Thought and Narrative Impact” Richard Gerrig has also proposed that “human thought is fundamentally structured around stories” (437). Establishing that these are abilities on which most thinking depends, Turner revolutionized the idea of narrative (especially literary) from an artistic and non-vital means of communication and demonstrated that it is an inseparable part of our lives. In other words, narrative gives shape to much of our everyday thinking and,
vice versa, many of our everyday happenings are understood narratively.

Research on ToM and metarepresentation has confirmed the ubiquity of narrative thought in our daily lives. Brian Boyd adds to this point the fact that far from learning to narrate events, narrative is, precisely, our means of understanding what goes on around us, at the same time reflecting how we do it (Origin 131). The implications of developing a metarepresentational capacity do not end there, as a matter of fact, "on some level, some of our cognitive systems do not distinguish between actual situations and deliberate fictions" (Zunshine, Why 69). What this means is that not only are we constantly building stories to understand our world, but also bringing all kinds of information closer to fiction, thus, facilitating the truthing of fiction and the fictionalization of true facts. This is the very dynamic whereby metafiction operates.

From this, it becomes clear that information entering our minds is not definitely differentiated between ‘just’ true and false. As a matter of fact, pieces of information constitute the new worlds of "the might-be-true, the true-over-there, the once-was-true, the what-others-believe-is-true, the true-only-if-I-did-that, the not-true-here, the what-they-want-me-to-believe-is-true, the will-someday-be-true, the certainly-is-not-true, the what-he-told-me, the seems-true-on-the-basis-of-these-claims and on and on" (Tooby and Cosmides, “Minds,” 20). All of these markers distinguish incoming information from both the real world and fictional ones, and for as complex as they look they are traced quite easily.

Interestingly, as Zunshine explains, it is also through metarepresentation that we tag (rather definitely) the source of any given piece of information as X, Y or Z — as true, false, or fictional, as coming from one source or another, etc. Much categorization, mediated by a variety of cultural conventions is achieved this way (Why 72). In other words, metarepresentation can both foster an overlapping of levels of reality but it also imposes categories to distinguish them. Conventions of what makes a story and what makes a different kind of narrative seem to be very much fixed. Certain genres, like History and biography, we believe to be governed by more ‘truthful’ conventions, while in others, our expectations tend to be more flexible regarding the amount of true-false
elements. The functions of ToM, and especially the problems of dealing with misreadings and misunderstandings of poor mind reading are at the core of fiction itself. Indeed, the gap between appearance, deceit and reality is a prevalent theme in much of art and literature (Boyd, *Origin* 149), so much so that, I argue, forms of metafiction have always accompanied fiction as a way to thematize and reveal the very problems of representation and the fragile reality/fiction divide.

Through metarepresentation we are able to negotiate between worlds, juxtapose them and create new ones. Metarepresentation is in many ways the basic worldmaking tool and worldmaking is at the bottom of creating and recreating fiction. In their construction of fictional worlds, readers "assum[e] the similarity of the fictional worlds to their own experiential reality" (Ryan, “Possible Worlds,” 447). Ryan has elaborated this as the principle of minimum departure, which leads, precisely, to establishing a sense of closeness between story and us. Although "minimum departure" seems a bit determinant, Ryan's principle is right to acknowledge a certain imposition, even in the form of organization and trimming, on the reader's part upon the fictional world. This strategy is a means through which we make stories our own and count for ourselves. Through this principle, every fictional world is our own. World making in that sense is an updating, even an actualization, of fiction to our here-and-now, and thus an interactive endeavor.

Up to now I have sought to establish that reading, listening or watching a story offers a meeting point between two worlds of meaning where there is an exchange between reader and story, and in which a live experience takes places. The world made out of that blend thus becomes a space of narrative interaction where we coexist with the narrated world. This is true of all fiction but even more so of metafiction, since it is already proposed in the text – even as the theme – that there is an overlap between the narrated world and the world of the reader. Although I am in no way trying to propose that fictional worlds are real worlds, I do wish to argue, that narrative and narrative fiction are part of the real world – as artifacts – and, consequently, are experienced as such. While the fictionalization of real life proves a much more common process and actually one we are quite used to – altered memories, daydreaming; the actualization of fiction poses a lot of conceptual problems, and seems to oppose our very sense of rationality. Nevertheless,
the level of involvement we experience while engaging in fiction constitutes already a form of actualization, though not literal, a way in which fiction does become part of our lives. For the remainder of this chapter I offer a characterization of metafiction and posit the ways in which it thematizes and makes use of our metarepresentational capacities involving readers in a more literal fashion than other kinds of fiction.

1.5 Metafiction

The definition of metafiction has undergone a long debate since the first use of the term. Mark Currie comments in the opening of his book *Metafiction* that “the first use of the term… is attributed to William Gass in the late 1960’s, who wanted to describe recent fictions that were somehow about fiction itself” (1). The elaboration of the critical term came only after many texts – mostly novels – had shown a sense of fictional self-consciousness. For example, for Currie, metafiction refers plainly to “novels which reflect upon themselves” (1). Patricia Waugh defines it as a “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (40). Linda Hutcheon who describes it as “fiction about fiction — that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1), has offered a third definition. Finally, Norman Holland has sought to be more specific in his definition: “metafiction tells a story in which *the physical medium of the story becomes part of the story*” (74 emphasis in the original). The one thread uniting these definitions is the complication in fiction of several levels of reality. This initial concern gets tackled from two main approaches: thematic: the story deals with the writing and reading – the (re)creation of the story – as the basis of the fiction itself, or with the difficulties of navigating the different levels of reality; and material: the story deals with the coming into being, literally the complex realization of the fiction we are engaging with.

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3 Metafiction also has a variety of sibling terms to account for specific incarnations of it. Aside from the term metafiction, mise-en-abime, Chinese box narrative, self-reflexive novel, faction, metanarration, among others, have all been used to refer to stories dealing in some way with fiction creation and recreation within fiction itself.
As soon as the notion of metafiction was first established, a little look backwards made scholars realize that, although there was a definite proliferation of these texts during the second part of the twentieth century, instances of metafiction could be found much earlier. Depending on which literary tradition we follow, the origins might shift a little, but it is generally accepted, and highly significant that the first modern novel *Don Quijote de la Mancha* is also the first metafiction. Nevertheless, different degrees of fictional self-consciousness that can also be considered metafictional can be traced back to, for example, Homer’s invocation of the muses at the beginning of the *Iliad*, or to the framed narratives of the *Arabian Nights*, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

The meeting of cognitive science and literary studies was still to take place at the time of the publication of these definitions of metafiction, except for Holland’s. And still, each one of them intuits essential aspects of metafiction that seem related to my cognitive-evolutionary approach. Metafiction, Currie proposes, “is less a property of the primary text than a function of reading” (5) an insight we can tie up to theory of mind and worldmaking. Likewise, Waugh posits that metafiction is an exploration of a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction. Although her focus is on the creation of metafiction, her proposition foreshadows the awakening of the reader to the cognitive apparatus, the fiction making mechanism, put into play when recreating a story. Hutcheon rightly points out that “what has always been a truism of fiction, though rarely made conscious, is brought to the fore [in metafiction]: the making of fictive worlds and the constructive, creative functioning of language itself are now self-consciously shared by author and reader” (30). Metafiction, in this sense, deals precisely with how we negotiate different levels of reality and how we become deeply involved with narrative worlds, while still being able to distinguish them. In other words, it deals with the processes of fiction creation and re-creation not only as an artistic craft, but as a human craving; it is an instantiation of what goes on cognitively when we construct a story. Metafiction stages the very processes of metarepresentation as worldmaking.

During this first wave of metafiction studies in the 70’s and 80’s, the focus was very much on prose and more specifically novelistic writing. Patricia Waugh went against this,
To release the idea of metafiction from the novelistic, and even the purely textual. For her, metafiction is a tendency that might be present in any narrative media. That consideration makes it possible to characterize metafiction on the basis of the aspects that recur in many examples of it; and which can, in fact, appear in other types of fictional narrative discourses including non textual ones such as visual arts. Elaborating on that, I argue that a current working theorization of metafiction has to include perspectives coming out of both media studies and biocultural criticism. If the physical medium is part of the story in metafiction, in our days, the materiality through which we access a fiction is complicated by media convergence. Furthermore, I propose that metafiction makes our cognitive processing of fiction also part of the story. Even if the cognitive processing of metafiction is a mental process, fiction making is moving towards literalization because of new media: video sharing sites, blogs, and participatory platforms, make it explicit for their audience that they are constructing fictions, giving them form, even living them not just cognitively but materially. Moving away from very specific metafictional phenomena, I wish to pin point three key characteristics that might take diverse forms, but are bound to appear in current metafictional narrative: fictional self-consciousness and self-reference, thematization of the writing and reading processes, and the manifestation of the reader’s own awareness of her role in the fiction making.

I am proposing is a redefinition of metafiction as a tendency of story that, together with all narrative, has adapted through history and through different analogue and digital media. If metafiction is a recurrent story type, it is likely because it tries out the very idea of creating and recreating fiction in our minds. As a simulation, metafiction teaches fiction and exercises our mental abilities both for creating other worlds and distinguishing them from the here-and-now. As I explore in depth in the following chapter, some characteristics of digital media seem to have reinforced the metafictional tendency due to the multiplicity of media options available and the high levels of participation and interactivity they invite. Metafiction, I argue, has the capacity to be even more immersive than other kinds of narrative because it plays with the very issue of being immersed in the fictional world and the mental processes that allow it. The particularity of interactive fiction in digital media is that, because of its mediation process the practice of recreating
a story is made explicit as participation, and, as a result, displays metafictional traits since a reader first approaches the narrative. The implication of this is very significant for the developments that literature and other narrative forms are having in the present time as produced for, by and in the social interaction of participatory media. Most important is that such narrative interaction happening online and then spilling off the screen constitutes an actualization of metafiction. It is also a social narrative since reader involvement does not only occur with the narrated world, but with the other readers that help construct it. I characterize the collective construction of a shared world of interaction in digital media as a metafictional narrative engagement.

To conclude this chapter, I want to argue that story and fiction are not media dependent and, being human constants, will manifest no matter what new platforms, digital or analogue, we find available. The pervasiveness of media devices and narrative content in our networked life nowadays, I advance, is amplifying how we approach stories, and might even be augmenting the possibility of metafictional engagement with narratives. Newly available platforms in the Web 2.0 are new embodiments and solutions to the need to share stories and could only lead to the explosion of storytelling we are witnessing. Since narrative constitutes such a fundamental component of the way we make sense out of our world on a daily basis, our interactions with narrative in digital media platforms are bound to operate under the same narrative organizing principle. In the following pages, I return to many of the premises outlined so far. Evolutionary and cognitive concepts remain the underlying theories. I develop my argument proposing that in our current media ecology there is an overt consciousness of the use of media and the processes of mediation that can be viewed as metafictional. The ultimate result of this is a literalization of the reader’s engagement with the fiction. Stories are being actualized physically too, becoming more a part of our ‘real’ lives. By establishing an actual, social engagement with their audience stories are refashioning how we are immersed in them and how they keep themselves alive. Digital media, far from being the end of fiction, even literary narrative, is giving way to new manifestations of story that carry on our fascination with it.
Chapter 2

2 On Narrative, Reading and Digital Media

Digital culture is still largely print culture. I wish to begin Chapter 2 with this provocation as a way of pointing out the tight interweaving between them in our current media ecology. The last ten years or so have seen the coexistence of digital and print media become more and more intricately bound. There has been no obliteration of print or other analogue media and, though highly popular, the digital are, by no means, the only media. As many studies in computer mediated communication indicate, much digital media functions over the exchange of text and is, thus, based on writing and reading. This combination has brought about new sets of practices, social as well as literary. Interestingly, whereas some of these practices seem to be in conflict with those of print culture, others hold a striking resemblance to them. An area where the influence of digital media is being clearly visible is narrative. An immediate result of this is that many concerns literary scholarship has studied for centuries in the book medium have regained currency in digital media and are being examined again under a new light.

In this chapter, I establish the theoretical background coming out of media studies that inform my characterization of interstory: a narrative existing simultaneously on multiple media and requiring much reader participation. My notion of interstory is grounded on two well-known media phenomena: intermediality and media convergence, which, I maintain, imply each other reciprocally. I take the imperative to tell fictional stories examined before as the thread uniting narrative from oral tradition into hypermedia, and as an explanation of the fact that every new medium is adopted for narrative. As Bryan Alexander puts it, “no sooner do we invent a medium than do we try to tell stories with it” (5). This view might seem a generalization of the fact that story will always exist, and that fiction will always have its place in human existence regardless of what media it gets rendered in. Hence, I wish to pair it with the theorization that story and fiction are organic and adaptable to their current environment, which causes them to change in minute but
relevant ways. As Marie-Laure Ryan suggests, texts in digital media might not change the basic conditions of narrative, but “they may produce creative alternatives to a narrative experience” (“New Media,” 354). As stories become increasingly more immersive for their audience in the context of media convergence, it is precisely their particular narrative renderings and experiences that I set out to explore.

The chapter is divided into four sections. First, I spend a few pages on the debate on reading and literature in the twenty-first century as impacted by digital media. Many literary scholars have taken the presence of digital media in the realm of literary studies as a threat to the permanence of cultural legacy and the validity of its largely book-based academic practices. I wish to refute that digital media are such a threat by putting in perspective that reading, from a cognitive neural approach, is a flexible, learned, and adaptable skill. Following Stanislás Dehaene and Maryanne Wolf, I propose, on the one hand, that textual literary reading is only one kind of reading and, on the other hand, that the neural wiring responsible for reading is too complex for us to understand how it is being transformed by digital media at this transitional moment. As a result, we are unprepared to say what the consequences of digital reading might be for literature or literary studies, or for any other kind of reading. What we can see is a proliferation of writing and reading practices in digital media especially in the context of Web 2.0, and we can look at particular examples of what is being currently created on them. Furthermore, I take Dehaene’s characterization of reading as a multi sensory task to advance the question of intermediality. The purpose of this is to establish a link between reading and how present instances of intermedial narrative are appealing to the intermedial dimension preexistent in reading.

The second section deals with intermediality, media convergence and other instances in which media intertwine and complement each other. The conceptualization of medium in this study stems out of a combination of what is considered medium in studies of intermediality and media convergence. An important part of this section is devoted to highlighting the ways in which intermediality and media convergence are conductive of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity in narrative and other art works. I close this section proposing a three-layer concept of medium that allows me to characterize interstory, but
which should lend itself to account for narrative and other artifacts created over the basis of multiple, digital and analogue media. Closely tied to the previous one, the third section deals with the processes of remediation and hypermediation as examples of intermediality and media convergence signaling a strong sense of self-referentiality and intertextuality. I take these ideas as the means through which intermedial, convergent narrative tends towards metafictionality.

Finally, in order to contextualize the concept of interstory and my case study, I touch upon some ideas regarding electronic literature and digital narrative. Subsequently, I propose that immersion and reader involvement are indeed functions of any kind of narrative, but particular aspects of media convergence are highlighting and modifying the shape they take in digital media. I conclude the chapter with the argument that the kinds of interactions coming out of media convergence and intermediality are bearing new narrative forms like interstory. The very media constitution of these kinds of narrative is fostering a metafictional turn that spills out of the pages and the screens and becomes the way in which readers engage collectively with the stories.

2.1 Reading, Digital Media, Reading in the Brain

As I have already advanced, digital culture cannot be separated from print culture. The correspondences between them are many and have become so complex for us to be able to think about one without the other anymore. The media shifts we have witnessed in the past decades have had effects as deep as those observed by Walter Ong in regards to orality and literacy: “a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the world is to purely oral people” (12). Even though the digital shift is still young, it has moved at such great speed that it has become increasingly more difficult to think of print and textuality without a digital component, not to mention that it is practically impossible to think of digital media without its textual components. Print and digital culture are both part of a large, and sometimes conflicting, network of economic, social, legal, aesthetic and technological factors. Tackling more than one of them would be already a monumental task. Therefore, the scope of this work is narrowed down to the shifts in narrative
production from print to digital culture as illustrated by literary theory. This study focuses especially on the implications of digital media (as seen in intermedial and convergent narratives) for the study of conventional notions pertaining mostly to a theory of metafiction and reader engagement.

Views on the transition, overlapping or collapse between print and digital culture have not been necessarily positive or productive. Debates on the subject have been characterized by suspicion, fear, and rejection on the one hand; and on the other, by ideas of progress, advance, and liberty. Outspoken worries about the end of the book, and the decline of the editorial and literary world at the turn of the twenty-first century have not been uncommon. This has been paralleled with fears of the demise of literature as expressed specifically by the decline of literary book reading. If the ‘end of the book’ is already a heated debate, it seems to become a lot more emotional when the fear of losing literary traditions is added. There are, at least, three approaches from which a certain level of rejection towards digital media and literature have been voiced: literature as testament of human tradition (Birkerts, Manguel), literary reading as institutional academic practice (Bauerlein, Manguel), and the shallowness of literary reading on-screen (Bauerlein, Miall, and NEA’s “Reading at Risk” and “To Read or Not to Read”).

Aside from discussing this issue in terms of supersession and preservation, I believe, the discussion should gear towards ways in which the current media interactions and the social involvement they foster have the potential to bring about fascinating new forms of narrative production and new scholarly approaches proper to them. A brief review of the debate, however, will help locate this study within the larger field.

Steven Birkerts is one of the best-known and most alarmingly pessimistic scholars dealing with the subject. Gathering evidence from his years of teaching in higher education in the US, in *Gutenberg’s Elegies*, he puts forward a series of concerns regarding reading and literature in the times of digital media, such as the diminishing of attention span, the impoverishment of language, and the loss of tradition among others (27). Moreover, for Birkerts, these losses entail an erosion of our capacity to add meaning to our experience through language – literature, being an important repository of that, has been hit the hardest (31). “Literature”, says Birkerts, “holds meaning not as content that
can be abstracted and summarized, but as experience. It is a participatory arena” (31-32). Birkerts seems to put all of the value of literature in written language and the book medium that contains it and the practices associated with it – not on the larger significance of narrative – as something bound to evaporate as soon as it moves from it; while he denies digital media the possibility of granting like experiences.

Alberto Manguel, who masterfully convinces us that there is nothing more beautiful or important in the history of humanity than reading (A History of Reading) is subtly advocating for the defense of the print world as well. Aside from his nostalgic preference of the print book over digital textual media, in his keynote address to the 2011 Simposio Internacional del Libro Electrónico, Manguel expressed his concern with how new reading technologies favor “virtues opposed to those required by deep reading” (my translation). The fact that the materiality of e-readers does not allow for deep reading and the “inhabitation” of a text becomes his argument against reading in them. For Manguel, digital reading also does not encourage understanding, thought or memory.

Along the same line, in his article “Online Literacy Is a Lesser Kind”, Mark Bauerlein builds his case against on-screen reading based on the findings made by Jakob Nielsen. Using eye-tracking devices, Nielsen has found that the pattern followed by people reading onscreen “looks like a capital letter F. At the top, users read all the way across, but as they proceed, their descent quickens and horizontal sight contracts, with a slowdown around the middle of the page. Near the bottom, eyes move almost vertically, the lower-right corner of the page largely ignored” (Bauerlein B10). Even though, they have different conceptual bases, Bauerlein’s conclusions are not really different from Birkerts’ or Manguel’s: “What we are seeing is a strange flattening of the act of reading…. We must recognize that screen scanning is but one kind of reading, a lesser one, and that it conspires against certain intellectual habits requisite to liberal-arts learning” (B11, emphasis mine). Manguel’s, Bauerlein’s and Birkerts’ approaches seem to hold literary training in higher education the dearest. This hints that the source of their rejection of reading in digital media is more related to the decline of institutional habits and practices, rather than to an integral view and understanding of digital media and of how they might actually be proposing other reading practices.
I see two main weaknesses in these approaches. The first one is a condensed paralleling of literature with reading/writing. Historically, the conventional notion of literature is strongly attached to writing and reading in print. Nevertheless, what we have seen, both long before and right now, is that narrative is not medium dependent, and in that sense the type of stories we identify as literature is one among others extending well beyond the realm of print culture. Likewise, writing and reading are part of a much broader set of scholarly and creative practices, not just literary. The rapid changes occurring to writing and reading in the digital era are surely having an impact on the development of narrative but it does not mean their end. Although we can agree with Birkerts and Manguel on the priceless value of literature and the experiences it evokes, the problem with their argument is the unnecessary confrontation between old and new media when historical evidence shows that different technologies have coexisted throughout time; to name but one example that has been widely studied, oral and written literature. The continuity and coexistence of media is a fundamental and evident fact in the current media ecology.

The second weakness of their arguments is shortsightedness. Birkerts, Manguel, and Bauerlein give the impression to be cheering for literature to become fossilized in its ways and in the print book medium. They also overlook both the history of the development of the book as object and all the economic, cultural, geographic, political and social factors contributing to its evolution, a process Katherine Hayles terms “the technical ensemble” (How We Think 90). This expectation is untenable if we are to consider that storytelling, and art in more general terms, have changed and adapted according to its current context and the technologies developed by people at any given moment, including print in the fifteenth century. This adaptation has always been part of artistic creations as seen with Boyd before, and goes on in newer, current media. Birkerts, Manguel, and Bauerlein seem to view literature – classical print literature and a liberal arts curriculum – as the only valid means of preserving narrative aesthetic experience through written language. Most strikingly, they seem to disregard the potential of new technologies and media not only to remediate that, but also to provide new stages on which literary experience and participation is possible.

Moreover, these concerns were voiced even before digital media had had a chance to start
showing its potentiality for the creation of narrative and a new way of distribution that would influence not only reading habits and processes, but reader involvement and experience altogether. Birkerts’ *Gutenberg Elegies*, for example, was first published in 1995 and Manguel’s *A History of Reading* in 1996 a few years before the popularization of the Internet took off. Apart from that, the memory of analogous media shifts is also lacking in these critiques of digital media. In “Networking the Field”, Kathleen Fitzpatrick very succinctly summarizes the history of non-digital new media disaccreditation within the humanities tradition:

Anxieties about the effects of digital media abound: it’s too often taken as read that the technologies that facilitate such easy communication are causing our actual communication skills to deteriorate. There’s little new in this; any media theorist confronted with a narrative about the deleterious effects of new modes of communication will happily point to Plato on the “forgetfulness” that the technology of writing would produce in the souls of those who learn it, or even Alexander Pope’s sense of print as a “scourge” for learned souls. It has always been so: new technologies are perennially imagined to be not simply the enemy of established systems but in fact a direct threat to the essence of what it is to be human. (par. 4)

Additionally, during the eighteenth century “bibliomania”, characterized by too much reading, was considered a disease. Karin Littau recounts it: “in the periodical press, but also in philosophical treatises and works of fiction, writers warned of too much print, too much writing, too much reading. Bibliomania had infected Western societies and become, as a French dictionary defines it in 1740: ‘une des maladies de ce siècle’” ([Reading 4](#)). An infinitely more detailed account of this illness is the subject of Holbrook Jackson’s two-volume *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (1931). The particular example of bibliomania is ideal to observe the way in which cultural notions about books and reading have changed so radically (even in a couple of centuries) to have ended up standing on the exact opposite end.

The sense of threat, fear of change and defensiveness have been met at the other extreme with explosive visions of an all digital future just around the corner. Famously, in 2007 Bill Gates, after listing a series of advantages of reading online, assured that reading would migrate completely to online resources:
[t]oday, for people who read newspapers and magazines, even the most avid PC user probably still does quite a bit of reading on print. As the device moves down in size and simplicity, that will change, and so somewhere in the next five-year period we’ll hit that transition point, and things will be even more dramatic than they are today. (Todd Bishop par. 2)

Within the exact period predicted by Gates, this still has not happened and it is not clear that it will happen in the immediate future. What we are seeing, however, is an ever more intricate convergence of media.

A somewhat different case of the development of reading in digital media has been made from empirical studies. In “Reading Behavior in the Digital Environment” Liu Zimming offers a survey of reading habits in electronic media pointing towards the emergence of a “screen-based reading behavior…. characterized by the long duration of time spent on browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, non-linear reading, and reading more selectively” (701-708). Similarly, in “Reading Hypertext”, David Miall and Teresa Dobson have specifically studied reading of literary hypertexts looking for the same kind of immersive experience found in print literary reading. Although their conclusion is that hypertext reading does not produce the same kind of literary experience (par. 28), I would not rush to take it to mean that hypertext is necessarily unable to evoke other literary experiences through different reading skills.

The very necessity of this debate is no doubt the sign that, for some years now, the technical ensemble comprising the book, reading, and literature has been undergoing a refashioning that will take us to still unknown literary and other narrative possibilities. No doubt, digital media and electronic writing/reading are causing changes in the way we create, distribute and consume literature in particular, and narrative in general. Despite the fact that many of the beloved old habits and skills developed by print, silent, and individual reading might be impacted, digital media may actually be proposing adaptations to them; even constituting a set of novel ones. The media shifts observed in the twenty-first century do not have to mean the end of “deep reading” as Manguel fears, or the total alienation of the past as Birkerts believes, or the impossibility of literary immersion as Miall sustains.
As Paul Duguid argues, the discussion has been led by two extreme tropes, “the first is the notion of *supersession* – the idea that each new technological type vanquishes and subsumes its predecessors….The second is the claim of *liberation*, the argument or assumption that the pursuit of new information technologies is simultaneously a righteous pursuit of liberty” (495). Duguid’s positioning of the problem between this irreconcilable dichotomy echoes Katherine Hayles’ debate of fear versus pleasure in post-humanism presented in the previous chapter. It is not surprising that both critics realize that neither end of the spectrum will put an end to the discussion. The key for them is not so much in being wary of which new developments may come with new media and technologies, but in viewing them as particular and, very likely, temporary embodiments of a larger necessity. A broader view such as this helps position any technological development in its particular context, account for its history and project its future. It also aids to rethink how new reading skills and new forms of narrative engagement are taking shape because of diverse creative outputs in digital media.

It is undeniable that reading is undergoing a series of changes apropos digital media; their implications in the long term, both cognitively and culturally, are still to be seen. What can be seen now from these approaches is that print reading remains the standard against which all other kinds of reading are measured, while the reading potentialities of digital media continue to be largely unknown and under exploration. Echoing Ong again, this is perhaps unavoidable as print reading is the available precedent that has served as the foundation for various theories of reading – literary, cognitive, and social. Nonetheless, comparative studies should aim at understanding how on-screen reading in general, and on-screen literary reading in particular, might be fostering new skills, capacities and habits. The results presented by Zimming, Miall and Dobson, and Nielsen speak of a new (or a renewed) set of abilities for the act of reading on screen for which specific training might be necessary, as much as it is for print reading. Seeing how reading coexists in digital and print media, Maryanne Wolf has called out for a “bitextual” or “multitextual” reading instruction (226). Without having to resort to either utopian/dystopian future predictions or pessimistic looks to the future, we must take advantage of the opportunity to shed light on the particular ways in which the creation, distribution and consumption
of reading, writing, and narrative are being practiced. Our current media ecology has produced many artistic manifestations comprising digital and print or other analogue media: art installations, entertainment productions, and electroacoustic music are only a few examples. The production of narratives has also been transformed by the media available and the social and institutional practices surrounding them. The particular affordances of narratives in media convergence have in store very interesting social and literary outcomes.

The possibilities that digital media might grant literary production should not be seen as a detriment to culture and traditions but as an addition to them that happens to be current at the present time. As I tried to show in the previous chapter, the fact that stories have an emotional and intellectual affect over those engaged with them is not a function particular of the medium, but of the way we make up stories in our minds and in relation to others. The question this leaves us with is, how do the technological developments of our times fit our cognitive architecture? The answer to this question was hinted at in the previous chapter: technologies are not developed outside the limits of our human capacities but, as Hayles proposes, co-evolve along with human skills in a feedback loop. Drawing from anthropological studies that trace technologies as primitive as the stone ax, Hayles suggests that human-technology co-evolution happens through epigenetic (non-genetic) changes. Simply put, people learn how to use and take advantage of a ‘new’ technology, which triggers the renewal of the skills associated with it. This, in turn, leads to a further iterative evolution of said technology and a further development of its adjacent skills: a dynamic that keeps bringing about new instantiations. In this dynamic process, one medium cannot be completely obliterated by another, but actually, through processes of remediation, are kept present in a different manifestation. Reading, writing and narrative and the technologies used to carry them out are subject to the same dynamic: “current evidence suggests that we are now in a new phase of the dance between epigenetic changes in brain function and the evolution of new reading and writing modalities on the web” (How We Think 66).

Scholars investigating the cognitive roots of the act of reading are still very wary to express what the new media may mean to reading in general and, even more so, to
literary reading. Seemingly accessory aspects of reading such as the direction of the text, or particular alphabetical features have a great effect on, for example, how long it takes for a person to become competent, and even what areas of the brain are involved in the act of reading. The many complex cognitive process involved in reading and in learning how to read should be indicative that even a small modification in the medium used for reading could potentially imply changes in how we deal cognitively with it. Historically, changes in reading media have abounded. These have affected not only the dissemination of content, but most likely how reading was carried out physically as well as cognitively.

Let us remember the famous anecdote retold by Alberto Manguel in A History of Reading, when Saint Augustine marveled at the sight of Saint Ambrose reading silently. While, at the time, silent reading had never seen and was obviously a striking new phenomenon, it went on to become the norm. Similarly, following Hayles, new reading technologies and the practices that accompany them encourage the each other’s development in ways we are already seeing and others still to be seen. Screens and hyperlinks do exert some sort of change at the cognitive level of reading as Miall and Dobson have examined, just as much as they have significance for the social or individual practices associated with reading. Because of all the factors related to reading, a direct, straightforward connection between screen reading and hyperlinking and the decline in literary reading cannot be easily established.

In our days, media possibilities for reading have multiplied and – I cannot stress this enough – while they cannot all be put in the same category, the particular relevance of each one must not be underappreciated. Increasingly, it is becoming clear that in our highly visual and allegedly oral world, reading and writing happen everywhere and constantly. Tim Carmody has proposed that we live in an age of hyperliteracy: “reading [takes place] everywhere, not just in books or magazines or newspapers, or on e-readers and tablets or even smartphones, but walking down city streets, searching for movies on Netflix, and on our television screens” (“Future,” par. 3). Apart from the already huge numbers of both print and electronic books being published, there is also an abundance of reading/writing technologies on the Internet: platforms, portals, and devices are being massively exploited. Consider, for example, the latest numbers from Twitter reaching 175
million tweets per day (“Twitter 2012”). This constitutes the equivalent of close to a hundred thousand pages written and read every day. As for weblogs WordPress, the leading blogging platform, holds about 66 million sites amounting to approximately the 40% of blogs worldwide. On WordPress alone an average of one million new posts on every possible topic imaginable are published per day (“WordPress Stats”). This, of course, does not mean any kind of writing done whether in print or electronic media is literature, or even narrative, and they must not be confused. There has always been writing that is not literature and, perhaps, the one distinctive feature of our age is the visibility that most writing now enjoys. Although a large portion of the writing and reading done on various platforms might not be of aesthetic value, by sheer numbers and the fact that, indeed, a very large portion of it is narrative, its cultural relevance must be acknowledged.

Having touched on the issue of quality and content, it is important to think for a moment what constitutes reading generally to distinguish it from literary reading. The notion of reading has many layers. Which perspective we use to characterize reading is decisive for its conceptual construction. At a basic level, reading is the decoding of written signs in order to grasp their meaning. From her psychological studies, Maryanne Wolf describes it as an invention of the human brain (3). At other levels reading is seen as an activity or practice embedded in larger contexts like literature, or as a skill “necessary to facilitate any further learning” (Lind 11). Viewed in this light, reading is a means to an end. UNESCO even proposes that reading is a human right key to achieving health, economic, political, civil and environmental goals (“Literacy,” 11). Nevertheless, not all of these notions of reading can be viewed in parallel. Indeed, each one seems to refer to only a certain aspect of reading’s “technical ensamble”, and it is important to keep in mind the differences between them. Though overlapping at many points reading is not the same when viewed as an access avenue to information, than when deemed a literary aesthetic experience, and so forth. Though it might be the same activity throughout, theoretically speaking different aspects of reading must be kept separate in order to untwine its particularities. The only way to do that is to go back to the basic cognitive mechanisms through which reading is conducted.
Stanislás Dehaene has put forward the neuronal recycling theory to explain how parts of the brain that originally evolved to carry out particular functions acquire a new function when we learn how to read. This makes reading a composite skill of other cognitive capacities: object recognition (visual), phonological processing (aural) and semantic access (Dehaene 51). This theory is based on a larger one: neural plasticity i.e. the adaptive capacity of our brain to change based on experience in order to deal with problems and challenges not found before. Once someone learns how to read, her “individual brain is forever changed, both physiologically and intellectually” (Wolf 5). Changes in the way we read because of new digital media are possible on every level. Maryanne Wolf, for example, is convinced that “[t]he next few decades will witness transformations in our ability to communicate… as we make the transition from a reading brain into an increasingly digital one” (4). Her approach, nonetheless, is based on the principle that the human brain has an “astonishing ability to rearrange itself to learn a new intellectual function”. We might be undergoing a rewiring process as we learn to deal with digital objects and reading, the same way our brain got rewired with the development of reading from other more basic cerebral functions, (Wolf 4-5). What is happening to reading in the digital area remains a topic for exploration, and even leading scientific experts on the subject, like Wolf herself, continue to ask more questions than can currently be answered.

Some of the most pressing questions perhaps are, how reading is going to change in digital contexts, how dramatic those changes will be, and closer to this study, how new forms of reading will result in new ways of fiction making, narrative and literature. Dolores Romero López, for example, is certain that “literatures of the future will be hypertextual or hypermedia, or will not come to be at all” (436). Katherine Hayles goes a step forward and poses that “[l]iterature in the twenty-first century is computational” (“Intermediation,” 99 emphasis mine). Her assertion is similar to Lev Manovich’s, when he states that digital media is more pervasive than we seem to think since aspects of it are involved in all the production, distribution or exhibition of texts (19). The real impossibility lies in knowing how it will develop, “in what senses is electronic literature in dynamic interplay with computational media, and what are the effects of these
interplays? Do these effects differ systematically from print as a medium, and if so, in what ways?” (Hayles “Intermediation,” 99).

I wish to come back to Dehaene’s characterization of reading as a composite of cognitive skills that include visual, aural, and semantic processing as a way to suggest that written language is, actually, not just a transparent medium of content. Therefore, I propose that reading be considered the process of meaning making through multisensory access to a text. This process is amplified by intermediality and convergent phenomena aimed precisely at appealing to different senses. The extended notion of reading I propose following Dehaene, featuring object recognition and phonetics might be facilitating and, therefore, explaining the seamless and widespread adoption of multiple media nowadays. It might also give a reason for the way in which multiple media are recurrently put together in contemporary artistic manifestations. And finally, it might also be implying a further kind of neuronal rewiring affecting our reading habits still in the making.

The directions those changes might take and their implications are yet to unfold. What the future of reading, literature, or the book will be is difficult to anticipate. The question whether digital media will become the norm or not is beyond our reach. At this stage, however, it is only possible to start understanding how these changes are happening as they happen. The different artifacts through which we read: books, magazines, newspapers, billboards, e-readers, computer screens, smartphones, and tablets multiply the possibilities afforded by reading, and make it pretty much impossible to speak of one kind of reading as Birkerts and Manguel do. Conversely, reading seems to be atomized into a multiplicity of media, skills, and the meanings associated with each one.

2.2 What is a Medium? Intermediality and Media Convergence

I have suggested that reading is at its cognitive basis comprised of more than just silent written language and that this might help explain why digital media have been so readily adopted for extended reading practices. As a matter of fact, I want to establish a
conceptual correspondence between object recognition and phonological processing involved in reading as different sensory channels coming together into one. In that sense, even textual reading is already an intermedial endeavor. Digital reading, because it usually involves image, video, sound, etc., is an extended notion of that. With this in mind, I would now like to turn to the notion of intermediality. Intermediality is the first central concept in my characterization of interstory and I wish to propose that although it might be becoming more recurrent thanks to digital media, it is by no means exclusive to it.

Intermediality is marginally related to multimedia as the amalgamation of various media such as text, image, audio, video, animation, etc. into a single work. In that sense, pretty much any webpage and application could be seen as intermedial. Nonetheless, putting together various media alone does not necessarily imply complementariness among them. I wish to establish that at the basis of intermediality rests the idea of interrelation, transgression, cross-pollination, interdependency, and any other kind of complementary interaction among media in a single work. Intermedial works, I suggest, appeal precisely to the extended cognitive skills involved in reading as well as others. Their recurrence in our days, moreover, might be indicative of the skills fostered or renewed by digital media but always grounded on our cognitive architecture.

Intermediality is a problematic term because it starts off from the assumption that media boundaries are clear-cut and interactions between them challenge their borders. A review of the concept reveals two things: (1) there is not a stable, unique concept of medium and, (2) media interactions are ubiquitous in art. These two principles are applicable to the discussion of media convergence as well. The discussion of what constitutes intermediality is intricate and difficult to tackle because the very concept of medium has been constructed according to the discipline dealing with it. Is medium tangible material (canvas and oil painting), intangible material (language, sound), channel of production (musical instrument, performer), channel of distribution (TV and radio), or artifact (book, electronic reader)? Is it possible to really speak of one without the other?

I wish to spend a few pages reviewing what seems to me the most comprehensive
definition of medium in the context of intermediality studies. Lars Elleström has done an invaluable effort to encompass many of the particularities and complexities of the concept of medium. In "The Modalities of Media" Elleström begins distinguishing between “basic media”, “qualified media”, and “technical media” as the overarching categories of medium:

Basic and qualified media are abstract categories that help us understand how media types are formed by very different sorts of qualities, whereas technical media are the very tangible devices needed to materialize instances of media types. Consequently, when talking about a medium without specifications, the term can refer to both a media category and a specific media realization….It is important to note that qualified, basic and technical media are not three separate types of media. Instead they are three complementary, theoretical aspects of what constitutes media and mediality. (12)

Examples of basic media according to Elleström are “moving picture”, “still picture”, and “sound” and are, so to speak, the building blocks of the more complex notion of qualified media. Qualified media includes historical, cultural, social, aesthetic and communicative aspects to determine the realm in which any medium is thought of as a medium conventionally (24-25). Examples of this are theater or opera, which are conventionally considered as one medium regardless of how it is constituted by language, sound, still and moving images, etc. “The defining features of a technical medium are its capacity to realize specific material interfaces and the perceiver's capacity to interact with these interfaces and with other users of the medium” (30). After considering all these layers of the concept of medium, Elleström concludes that intermediality can be found both between basic and qualified media (36). On this basis, Elleström digs deeper into the inner features of each category of media to further assemble a catalogue of modalities akin to all processes of mediation that include material modality, sensorial modality, spatiotemporal modality and semiotic modality (15). These four modalities affect how basic media are constituted, conceptualized, and perceived even at a cognitive level.

At the bottom of Elleström’s view lies the implication that intermediality is a precondition of the process of mediation since any and every basic medium comprises sensorial, semiotic, spatiotemporal and material modalities to be configured. While this
can be linked to the very idea of reading proposed above, Elleström’s proposition, for as illuminating and minutely elaborated as it is, methodologically, seems too broad and multilayered to approach specific artworks, texts or performances. A similar endeavor to classify all possible manifestations of intermediality has been taken by Werner Wolf. In ““Cross the Border - Close that Gap”: Towards an Intermedial Narratology” Wolf attempts to account for as many types of media interactions as possible, among them plurimediality, multimodality, transmediality, intermedial transposition, and intermedial reference. Irina Rajewsky follows this tendency and establishes three narrower subcategories of intermediality:

1. Intermediality in the narrower sense of media transposition…also referred to as medial transformation, as, for example, film adaptations of literary texts, novelizations and so forth.

2. Intermediality in the narrower sense of media combination…which includes phenomena such as opera, film, theatre, illuminated manuscripts, computer or Sound Art installations, comics, or, to use another terminology, so called multimedia, mixed media and intermedia forms.

3. Intermediality in the narrower sense of intermedial references…for example, references in a literary text to a specific film, film genre or film qua medium (that is, so-called filmic writings), likewise references in a film to painting, or in a painting to photography and so on. (55)

Doubtless, insights produced by these efforts shed light on the variety and inner workings of phenomena that can be approached under the umbrella term of intermediality. However, coming back to Elleström, the intricacy of what makes up a medium complicates the separation of its various dimensions and, thus, the interrelation between one likely implies the crossing of others. Although narrower definitions are useful, often when dealing with particular examples, we are bound to find overlaps between terms proving their original division somewhat pointless. As new media combinations continue to appear, scholars are bound to push the terminological and theoretical boundaries set by themselves. Therefore, I suggest that notions of intermediality rather than sticking to a catalogue of what makes particular instances intermedial or not, should be broader to account for their features and thus, more a set of heuristic tools capable of highlighting the media processes of composition and consumption of a given piece. The purpose of
this is the conformation of a theory from the bottom up, that is, not one that is applied
down to like phenomena, but one that might start to take shape according to particular
features of specific instances and, perhaps, be applied to similar examples. To this end, I
want to pick out three broad starting point definitions of intermediality:

1. Werner Wolf’s as “any phenomenon involving more than one medium”
   \[(Metareferential \ 40)\]

2. Marie-Laure Ryan’s as, “the medial equivalent of intertextuality [covering] any kind
   of relation between different media” (“Preface,” 3)

3. Lars Elleström’s as “the phenomenon whereby the properties of all media partly
   intersect” (4).

From here, I take a few outstanding features: plurality of media, the relations between
them, the relations between their properties, and the potential uniqueness of each
resulting phenomenon. Additionally, because of the conceptual thread of metafiction that
runs through this work I wish to advance two implied aspects of intermediality that gain
relevance in the pages ahead: self-referentiality and intertextuality. In different types of
studies dealing with visual arts, performance, and film in relation to text, both self-
referentiality and intertextuality have been paired with intermediality as mechanisms
through which a given medium comes to the fore in a particular artwork. It has also been
seen as a means through which one medium is further referred or associated with another.
Valerie Robillard in her exploration of Callum Colvin’s \textit{Fragments of Ancient Poetry}
suggests: “the advantage of exploring intermediality (partly) in terms of intertextuality
lies in the fact that the interaction between the visual and verbal arts can be considered in
terms of their interreferentiality and semiotic encoding” (150). Robillard’s idea
presupposes a two level connection of media, semiotic and material. This approach takes
her to develop her notion of intermediality \textit{as} intertextuality i.e. as material referentiality,
re-presentation of one medium in another, association, and allusion (152). Although her
focus is on image-text interaction, the mechanism described by her can be readily
extrapolated into narrative intermediality.

Likewise, Christina Ljungberg’s study on the adaptation and further media relations
between Laurie Anderson’s performance \textit{White Lily}, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film
Berlin Alexanderplatz, and Alfred Döblin’s novel of the same title, points towards some interesting features of intermedial works as:

- radically performative as we are confronted with hybrid forms that generate something new and unique; strongly self reflexive, since they focus attention both on their own mode of production and on their own semiotic specificity, which is heightened by the increasing digitalization of interacting media; [and] a highly effective communication strategy, as they give readers, viewers and listeners access to different levels of meaning. (83)

From Ljungberg’s characterization of intermedial performativity, I am most interested in the communicative strategies that potentially involve readers, viewers and listeners further into the intermedial work as a form of latent narrative self-reflexivity. Performativity gives audiences a space to participate in the pieces and brings their experience closer to the story, artwork, or performance. Making them partake in the constitution of the work and access different levels of meaning, the role of viewers/readers/listeners gains prominence in a similar fashion as that observed in metafiction.

Media convergence is the second key concept in my characterization of interstory. Similar to intermediality, media convergence is also a form of media amalgamation. Nevertheless, the interactions between media are regulated by a set of individual and social possible practices and uses and, indeed, the very concept of medium is somewhat different. Credited by many as the pioneer of media convergence studies, Ithiel de Sola Pool described it in 1983 as:

the blurring [of] the lines between media, even between point to point communications such as the post, telephone, and telegraph, and mass communications, such as the press, radio and television. A single physical means – be it wired, cables or airwaves – may carry services that in the past were provided in separate ways. Conversely, a service that was provided in the past by any one medium – be it broadcasting, the press, or telephony – can now be provided in several different physical ways. So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding. (23)

Already in this early definition media convergence can be seen as a mode of communication enfolding political, technological, industrial, social and textual
dimensions also present in more recent characterizations of the term.

Klaus Bruhn Jensen describes media convergence as “a historically open-ended migration of communicative practices across diverse material technologies and social institutions” (15). Usually associated with digital media, convergence, nonetheless, keeps a close relationship with ‘old’ media. The intricate connections among media we observe now bring together print, and other analogue media together with all types of digital ones. For Graham Meikle and Sherman Young, media convergence communication is characterized by contestation and continuity, an encounter of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media: “it is not just about bringing about transformation through the dissemination of new information, but also about maintaining relationships, about maintaining the continuity of cultures through time” (10). This has led Meikle and Young to propose the definition of media convergence as “networked digital media” (3) that would include pretty much every media manifestation seen nowadays. For Jenkins, convergence is “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2). For Jenkins, speaking not of media convergence, but of convergence culture, a paramount factor is the audiences’ behavior in search of experiences.

Networkedness and digitality are without a doubt catalysts for the convergence of media. They provide, so to speak, the architecture through which contents can be accessed and navigated. They make it possible for audiences to establish links between such contents and the way they are brought together. However, the fact that digital media is networked is not enough to account for the social behavior of individuals coming together apropos, for example, a story, in the way that Jenkins proposes. Content must be rich and immersive enough to awaken the behaviors described by Jenkins. Media convergence is not just about scattering content pieces around various platforms, it is about taking advantage of the channels of communication already in place to create the kind of experiences audiences want.

As Jenkins further elaborates, delivery systems or technology are ever changing, but the
cultural practices around them complicate those changes. Convergence is also a cultural phenomenon affecting the practices of content sharing in which “consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (*Convergence* 3). This kind of behavior can only be explained by the fact that networked media convergence is already part of everyday life; a point that Niels Finnemann made in “Mediatization Theory and Digital Media”, and has been retaken by Meikle and Young. In other words, the process of media convergence obeys social, organic, and adaptive dynamics through which, as Tim Dwyer suggests, private experience becomes networked shared experience (44). The fact that media have become as Meikle and Young would have it, “part of the furniture”, establishes a flow between the personal and the public, that which exists in our lives and in the digital networked world. However, what type of content will be successful at urging audiences to look for it does not depend on the established media or on how familiar it is to audiences.

I wish to link this to some of the assertions I made in the previous chapter about the human impulse to share stories and knowledge fictional or otherwise. The social behavior observed by Jenkins and others in convergence culture can easily be seen as an instantiation of that sharing drive, and thus explain the unpredictability of what contents – or stories – draw the sustained attention they require to produce a convergent cultural phenomenon. Similarly, the ancient social impulse of sharing seems to be the force behind collaboration in the networked media and resulting in the creation of huge amounts of user-generated content in the Web 2.0. Meikle and Young support the social aspect of media convergence and highlight the growth in “the scale and scope of possibilities afforded to users, who can now find a common ground and common purpose with remote, dispersed others whom they might not otherwise have encountered at all” (121). It is at this level that media convergence becomes a form of interaction between individuals leading to the creation of particular artworks, or other cultural objects. Specific forms of interaction afforded by a particular medium result in the organic conformation of texts. These texts, in turn, have the stamp of the creation process – medial and social – out of which they emerged and that, in turn, makes them heavily self-referential.
Offering a useful catalogue of convergent media texts, Meikle and Young list: (1) The mash-up model in which “text of the same form, never intended to converge, are brought together in ways that their original authors might not have considered, in order to complement, counterpoint, or subvert these texts” (80). (2) The multimedia model, “the textual convergence that occurs when previously distinct media forms are combined in ways that blur established understandings of both a media institution and the activity with which it is associated (viewing, reading, listening, playing)” (80). And of more relevance to this work, (3) the transmedia model, in which “a common text is spread across the widest possible range of media forms and exists as a branch of intellectual property that has elements in both established (television, books, cinema) and convergent (web, videogames) media as well as in ancillary industries (toys, t-shirts) and an expanded range of locations, both physical and virtual” (81).

From Meikle’s and Young’s catalogue it is possible to make out that in media convergence, unlike in intermediality, the identification of the material boundaries separating one medium from another is somewhat more straightforward. Possible media items include, for example, a video clip, a print book, a still image, a blog, a film, a TV series, a location, a videogame, an object, etc. The transgression can be done both at the level of the media themselves as in the mashup model; the institutional production and the activities of the audience as in the multimedia model; or as in the transmedia model, where it is the content that flows across media while the audiences follow it wherever it goes. This begs the question, what exactly is converging in media convergence? Is it all the contents and services coming together in a single device (laptop, smartphone, tablet)? Is it contents being atomized into various platforms and devices, then exerting a cohesive force between them? Does it happen in the production or the consumption end? Is it that all media have become computable? And, perhaps more importantly, what is the relevance of particular convergent artifacts? I want to suggest that in media convergence it is individuals that are coming together to share information, to share common stories. That, more than any other, seems to be the reason why diverse media are put together, so that there are more ways to take part in that collective, empathic activity.
I want to advance interstory as one instance of Meikle’s and Young’s “convergent texts”. Interstory is a fragmentary narrative constituted by various media components and gaining meaning as readers put together those components. This succinct and tentative definition is further developed in the next chapter. The starting point of this is to establish a specific and heuristic definition of medium to accompany the characterization of interstory. From intermediality studies, Ryan proposes that medium is constituted by two aspects:

the technological (a channel for long-distance communication) and the artistic (the material or form used by an artist, composer or writer). If medium is to acquire narratological relevance, it is as a “language” with a specific storytelling power, which means, as a basically semiotic phenomenon….But channel-type media can also give rise to a distinct type of narrative that take advantage of their distinct affordances. When this happens, the distinction between medium as semiotic phenomenon and medium as channel of transmission disappears, and technology acquires genuine narratological significance. (“Preface,” 2-3)

Even though it would seem that medium in intermediality studies is mostly taken as semiotic material, the examples mentioned before, all point to more than one type of semiotic material: text and image in Robillard’s study; and text, film, and performance in Ljungberg’s. The importance of seeing medium as a technological channel for communication is that it allows me to couple it with the discussion of current popular social practices of art and entertainment engagement in media convergence. Most importantly, this coupling is aimed at exploring intermedial practices bound to their particular context and more specifically to their audiences. Whether textual, visual or otherwise, these practices, as Rajewsky would have it, “necessarily constitute themselves in relation to, and within the scope of, the overall medial and discursive landscape at a given point in time, including the respective delimitations of conventionally distinct art forms and media” (64).

Unlike in intermediality studies, in media convergence there is a strong emphasis in the social process behind the interrelations of media. This has propitiated an association of media convergence with the idea of ‘new media’ as products, platforms and devices emerging out of the social and economic contexts. What then constitutes ‘new media’?
And how heavily does it depend on digital technologies? Meikle and Young pronounce themselves against the use of the term ‘new media’ as a synonym of media convergence:

there are some very real problems in deciding what is to count as ‘new’. The World Wide Web is already twenty years old….The history of the mobile phone might be traced back as far as Marconi or even Morse…. Some of the earliest videogames date to 1958….The image-manipulation application Photoshop has been with us for twenty years; word processors, desktop publishing and email for longer; and even the iPod for ten. (3)

Lev Manovich, instead, insists on computer mediation as the key to distinguish ‘new media’. The emphasis on computer mediation, according to Manovich, originates on “the convergence of two separate historical trajectories: computing and media technologies [and] the translation of all existing media into numerical data accessible through computers. The result is new media – graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts that have become computable” (20). “New Media” for Manovich seem to be all kinds of semiotic media made computable, while the ubiquitous material medium is a computer. Consequently, Manovich’s notion of “new media” is limited and fails to account for the convergence of media other than digital or even various digital ones. The importance of media convergence is not just that it is prone to really wide distribution because it is computable and thus spreadable through the network joining a huge portion of the world population. Its importance also resides in that it brings together different technological materialities and the practices associated with them. These are the most salient aspects for Henry Jenkins who, following Lisa Gitelman, defines medium as:

a model… that works on two levels: on the first, a medium is a technology that enables communication; on the second, a medium is a set of associated 'protocols' or social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology. Delivery systems are simply and only technologies; media are also cultural systems. Delivery technologies come and go all the time, but media persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum. (Convergence 13-14)

As can be seen, the twofold characterization of medium by Jenkins is complementary to Ryan’s. Through the middle aspect of channel or technology of communication, I propose to take Ryan’s definition as the semiotic building blocks of narrative that meet Jenkins’ social and cultural practices associated with them. Following Ryan, through
those material channels, the inner semiotic configuration of the object is built intermedially. Simultaneously, following Jenkins, a form of interaction among individuals takes place through the medial and material construction of said object. The implication of this is that media convergence and intermediality imply each other reciprocally. This three-layer characterization of medium allows the description of interstory, both an intermedial and convergent narrative; and accounts for the subtle nuances as well as the relevance of media in the constitution of this particular type of narrative. I propose intermediality is the inner creative narrative process of interstory, while convergence is the outer social and communication mechanism through which interstories are recreated, and accessed.

There is another aspect that this concept of medium brings to the fore: the instability of content moving around diverse media. For Jenkins, “new media technologies enable the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception” (Convergence 11 emphasis mine). Jenkins speaks of the ‘same’ content as the same story in the context of transmedia storytelling. Nonetheless, I sustain that even the ‘same’ content, when passing on to a new channel of communication gains new semiotic properties, it is transcoded to use Manovich’s word, and is thus, consumed and made out differently by readers and spectators. Therefore, repetition in media convergence should be understood as reiteration and remediation emphasizing or obscuring distinct aspects of the content but not leaving it unaffected.

2.3 Remediation and Hypermediation

Remediation and hypermediation can be seen as two mechanisms through which content is transformed when moving around media and also as instantiations of intermediality and convergence. Broadly speaking, remediation is “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 45). Despite Bolter’s and Grusin’s characterization of remediation as a representation, I wish to see it as a reshaping or refashioning of media, which, incidentally, might come in the form of representation. This way, I link remediation to Hayles’ theorization of technogenesis as a reformulation of media in
Another media responding to a larger cultural problem, and to Meikle’s and Young’s dynamic of contestation and continuation. Angela Ndalianis explains remediation as a way in which:

**new media always retain a connection with past forms. Like painting, architecture, and sculpture, which have longer history of traditions to draw upon, contemporary media such as the cinema, computer games, and the internet “remediate” or refashion prior media forms, adapting them to their media-specific, formal and cultural needs”** (6).

More succinctly, for Katherine Hayles, remediation is “the cycling of different media through one another” (*Machines* 5). Remediation does not pertain only to digital media and can, undoubtedly, be found in art and narrative of all times: paintings of a map, a book, or a sculpture are already forms of remediation. Nevertheless, the processes entailed in convergent texts constitute distinct forms of remediation, and perhaps more recurrent ones, especially those afforded by the capabilities of digital media, for instance: a computer screen made to look like a print magazine and imitating some of its particularities like the turning of pages, the rasping sound of paper, and so forth.

Remediation is easy to picture when it deals with a visual representation of one medium in another, or when it rehearses material metaphors like the paper page look in e-readers, or the brushstroke effect in image manipulation software. More nuanced forms of remediation are those affecting narrative and narrative genres. This can be seen, for example, in oral literature, as literature written to remediate the sounds and rhythms of oral narratives. Likewise, new forms of narrative taking place in digital media exhibit their relation to print literature, examples of this are: blognovels refashioning installment novels, text message and email narratives proposed as the new epistolary novels, and so on. The intertwining of the three layers of medium in these examples is so tight that a modification of one will have an effect on the others. As Bolter and Grusin sustain, there are “close ties between the formal and material characteristics of media, their ‘content’, and their economic and social functions” (67). Therefore, if the form of a literary text or genre is altered in any way because of its rendering (creation and distribution) on digital media, its content and its reception will also be impacted. As Littau states, “[n]ew media invent not just new forms of fictions, but also new means of perceptual manipulation. As
such they present audiences with new opportunities for experiencing fictional worlds” (Reading 7). Simultaneously, as Ndalianis points out, the process of remediation always keeps the connection between the new and the old whether it is acknowledged or not.

Embedded in its technical ensemble, how a medium is perceived changes with time. New digital media, Bolter and Grusin say, “oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity” (18). Through both, immediacy and hypermediacy, media aim to provide an authentic experience of what is being represented to the viewer, spectator or reader: “[h]ypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same aim: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real… [T]he real is defined in terms of the viewers experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore more authentic) emotional response” (53). It is impossible not to talk about the real when discussing representation and authentic experience, but the authors, and I along with them, are quick to clarify that the real is not thought of metaphysically, but in the sense that “all mediations are themselves real. They are real as artifacts (but not as autonomous agents) in our mediated culture” (53). In this dynamic, hypermediacy makes a medium evident as a mediating platform that does not give immediate access to the real object being represented; on the contrary, immediacy makes a medium seem like it is portraying reality without mediation. Additionally, media that originally seemed to provide an authentic unmediated experience might lose some of that transparency. Conversely, media trying to grant an immediate experience in regard to the object represented can seem, at first, too artificial. Drawing on my argument in the previous chapter, hypermediation – just like metarepresentation – entails the recognition of a representation as a representation and becomes the site where we engage in the negotiation between different levels of (mediated) reality.

In the process of remediation, the very existence of the medium comes to the forefront given that representing one medium in another implies a refashioning or a reformulation of it. While immediacy seeks to erase the medium and offer the viewer nothing but the represented object, hypermediacy seeks “to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgment” (Bolter and Grusin 41). Remediation, then, constitutes the process through which one medium highlights, refashions or absorbs
previous media in a relationship of continuation and contestation, as Miekle and Young suggest. The constant movement and innovation seen nowadays in digital media has proved fertile ground for these processes to unfold rapidly. Nevertheless,

introducing a new media technology does not mean simply inventing new hardware and software, but rather fashioning (or refashioning) [a physical, social, aesthetic and economic] network. New digital media are not external agents that come to disrupt an unsuspecting culture. They emerge from within cultural contexts, and they refashion other media, which are embedded in the same or similar contexts. (Bolter and Grusin 19)

Again, the refashioning proposed by Bolter and Grusin echo the idea of human-technology co-evolution, previously discussed. Remediation, because it is based on the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy is dependent on current cultural contexts that is, what might have been considered immediate at some point in history, can now seem hypermediated. This change of perspective, in turn, calls for a refashioning to reinstate the sense of authentic experience and address or help solve a recurrent problem. As those cultural contexts change we respond with new media forms that will continue to provide seemingly closer, more immediate experiences.

Although Bolter and Grusin focus mainly on painting, photography, television, and film, very similar phenomena can be observed in narrative production. It would seem that narrative had not changed medium until the digital age, having inhabited the print book medium for so long. This is certainly not the case if we consider oral literature, film, and theater adaptations as forms of remediation. Even representations within the same medium, like a text within another one (framed narratives, for example), can be viewed as a case of remediation recurrent in literary narrative (49). Forms of remediation in this sense could be seen in intertextual strategies where one text can be found in another, i.e., the presence of Madame Bovary in Woody Allen’s “Kugelma’s Episode” or the extreme example of Jorge Luis Borges’ “Pierre Menard, escritor del Quijote”. Even the recurrence of certain stories like the Faust myth in several versions could be taken as instances of remediation.

Metafiction, I want to propose, is an instance of hypermediated narrative, exhibiting the very fictional status of the story as it comes into being and occupies its textual, visual, or
otherwise medium. In media convergence, metafiction is constituted by its media components. The conventional processes of creating, narrating, reading, and fiction making are made evident in the media that make up a story’s convergent and intermedial materiality. What I am proposing is to draw a connection between hypermediation in metafiction with my previous argument regarding metarepresentation. As argued before, in metafiction, the representation of other writings, creations, books, and artifacts together with the construction of several narrated worlds highlight the existence of the different levels of reality and the need to negotiate between them. In media convergence, metafiction highlights the different media used in the construction of the narrated world, and the attempt to provide a more immediate access to the narrated world evidences its very making. The more intricate the interplay among the represented media, the more evident the way in which they have been incorporated in the narrative as various instances of the narrated world. In other words, distinct media instantiations in media convergence metafiction stand also for distinct levels of reality. Navigating hypermediated narratives is not dissimilar to navigating different levels of reality like we do through metarepresentation. Indeed, it is also through this cognitive mechanism that we assign a location to each medium within the narrative, its roles, and its relation to our here-and-how, and to a story at large. In other words, hypermediation outlines the path whereby we keep track of the different nested levels of reality in metafiction as proposed by various media.

Complementing my definition of metafiction from the previous chapter, I now add that, in the context of media convergence, it operates on the basis of hypermediation. There is an acknowledgement of the mediation of the story and, along with it, an overt consciousness of the distinct instances of the narrated world. Media convergence, because it functions on several platforms simultaneously, provides a stage for hypermediation and metarepresentation to establish the narrative connections and disconnections between the elements constituting a story. Readers not only navigate these elements, they also witness their interrelations. Certainly, this is a consequence of interactivity and networkedness, but that does not mean that all digital narratives, or all instances of electronic literature share the same characteristics. What, then, distinguishes
a convergent narrative, like interstory, from other instances of literature and narrative
done on digital media?

2.4 Electronic Literature, Digital Narrative and Virtuality

The first referent of electronic literature that comes to mind is interactive fiction, also
commonly referred to as hypertext literature. The term hypertext literature was coined by
Bolter himself and Michael Joyce (author of the first published hypertextual novel,
Afternoon a Story) in their paper “Hypertext and Creative Writing”. For them, in
interactive fiction, “the point of a hypertext is that it can change for each reader and for
each act of reading” (41). Hypertext, they sustained, could also fit perfectly the
experimental purposes of modern literature. In interactive fiction, the reader was
“unusually powerful” and his decisions, expressed in a choice of hyperlinks,
“determine[s] what text he will see next”, thus, the experience of the reader depends upon
his own interactions with the work (42). As pointed out by Norman Hollad and Anthony
Niesz, the characteristics of hypertext fiction result in self-referentiality, reader
prominence and ultimately a way of interacting with the fiction not unlike the dynamics
found in metafiction (“Interactive Fiction,” 113). I bring hypertext into this discussion not
just because of its similarities to metafiction, but because hypertext constitutes an
indisputable building block of digital media. Indeed, it is difficult to think of ways in
which networked media do not rely heavily on a hypertextual apparatus of some kind. In
convergent narratives even when analogue media are part of them, a network structure comparable to hypertext is common to link the various components.

Interactive fiction, however, is not the only kind of digital literature. The potential
combinations of electronic literature are vast, but the notion is not all encompassing or
stable, so much so that Katherine Hayles prefers to propose a characterization based on
contexts. Likewise, for Terry Harpold, digital narrative is a moving target that continues
to evolve and change as fast as the technologies that support it (“Narrative,” 108). Even
when, the connection between media convergence and literature has for the most part
been done exclusively in terms of transmedia narratives, I suggest that in many ways both
digital narrative and electronic literature are products of media convergence – a
remediation and a contestation of print literary traditions:

Readers come to digital work with expectations formed by print, including extensive and deep tacit knowledge of letter forms, print conventions, and print literary modes. Of necessity, electronic literature must build on these expectations even as it modifies and transforms them. At the same time, because electronic literature is normally created and performed within a context of networked and programmable media, it is also informed by the powerhouses of contemporary culture, particularly computer games, films, animations, digital arts, graphic design, and electronic visual culture.

(Hayles *Electronic Literature* 4)

Electronic literature, Hayles maintains, is a “digital born… first generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer” (3). Hayles somewhat restrictive definition has been expanded by the Electronic Literature Organization to include “works with an important literary aspect that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer” (“What,” par. 6). In turn, Harpold seeks to enumerate a few aspects recurrent in digital narrative as has been observed until now such as hypertext, spatial tropes, interactive interfaces, virtual reality, and immersive environments, among others. As a matter of fact it seems that narrower definitions will be too restrictive while more open ones might become unmanageable. Nevertheless, from Harpold’s elaboration, there are two features of digital narrative I wish to emphasize: (1) it “play[s] a central role in the hybridization of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media forms”; and (2) “texts crafted with one medium in mind are consumed in another… or they are created with multiple media in mind” (“Narrative,” 110). In other words, even though he does not draw the connection, Harpold’s description of digital narrative is parallel to convergent narrative.

Although they are not identical, convergent and digital narratives share many correspondences: the use of networked machines, hypertextual structures, and intermediality. The most important shared characteristic might actually come from the networking qualities of digital media, and not from the literary content or the aesthetic purposes. Hayles’ own definition of electronic literature establishes that it is a “trading zone… in which different vocabularies, expertises, and expectations come together to see
what might emerge from their intercourse” (4). Though both electronic literature and convergent narrative are undeniably hybrid, in this regard, an aspect setting them apart is where these different expertises come from. In electronic literature, Hayles seems to suggest they come from the part of the author and are put together in the creation of the digital text. Conversely, in convergent narratives, these skills also pertain the readers. Readers are asked not only to take part in the narrative’s different aspects going on in different media, but to acquire the skills that allow them to interact with each technology, whether it is a social network, a forum, a blog, a printed page, a set of hyperlinks, an event, an actual location, etc.

Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1998) anticipated how, through digital media, readers and authors would become players and participants creating an immersive narrative environment (123). For this to occur, Murray also characterizes digital narrative in spatial terms as a meeting place for both readers and authors. This, of course, does not displace the temporality of narrative, but it does characterize it as an event, in time and space, that readers get to experience (125). The spatialization of narrative and the interaction between readers and authors suggest a collapse of the conventional boundary between the narrated world and our world. Harpold explains this as “a reworking or transgression – a performance – of diegetic limits such that the player or reader functions as a pseudodo-actant or focalizer, span intra – and extra – narrative fields” (*Exfoliations* 112). Favored by the hypermediacy of media convergence, the spatiality proposed by Murray, I suggest, gives shape to the third space of metafictional engagement where readers and authors can engage in the fiction making and, because of its interactive features, the boundaries between fiction and reality become porous. How is this third space created? I want to suggest that a narrative’s apparent ubiquity is constructed by means of “virtuality” and seriality.

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4 As a matter of fact Hayles’ catalogue of electronic literary genres is a token of the texts’ hybridity. Based on the programs and platforms used for composition, Hayles lists among them: hypertext fiction, network fiction, interactive fiction, locative narratives, installation pieces, generative texts, codework, flashpoems, etc. (*Electronic Literature* 30). In that sense, electronic literature is a higher category that would contain both digital narrative and convergent narratives like interstory.
Following Pierre Lévy, Marie-Laure Ryan proposes virtuality as a function of narrative that not only is independent on digital media, but also a recurrent element of text actualization at a phenomenological level. For Ryan, the way of “approaching fiction as a virtual reality, rather than as a system of signs should lead to an emphasis on the immersive dimension of the reading experience” (“Virtuality and Textuality,” 128). Furthermore, Ryan characterizes the virtual as “not at all the opposite of the real. It is on the contrary, a powerful and productive mode of being, a mode that gives free rein to creative processes” (“Reading,” 122). The relationship of the virtual, then, is not with the real, but with the actual, and it “involves any mental operation leading from the here-and-now, the singular, the usable once-and-for-all, and the solidly embodied to the timeless, abstract, general, versatile, repeatable, ubiquitous, immaterial and morphologically fluid” (“Reading,” 123). The virtual is in a few words the potential of worlds other than the ‘here-and-now’ to be actualized as an artistic creation or as the process of its recreation. Following this, the virtuality of a text is its potential for multiple actualizations not just on the physical sense as distinct narrative instantiations, but as multiple readings by multiple readers through multiple media. Features of digital and media convergence are not the raison d’être for the virtuality of narratives, but they do amplify it by offering the capacity to access them anywhere and anytime. In their study of TV series, Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson suggest that “interconnected story lines, both realized and implied, extend far beyond any single episode to become a metatext that structures production, diegesis, and reception” (xii). The possibility of affecting the narrative as it develops is also on the hands of the readers who, thus, gain an increased prominence in the fiction making.

This takes me to the other feature leading up to the apparent ubiquity of convergent narratives: seriality. In media convergence, narratives are in the process of development and, as Tom Abba would have it, are forward-looking (65). A serialized narrative “produce[s] a story, or a narrative trace, as it runs, as opposed to a text that represents events that have already taken place – really or fictionally” (MacMahan 532). The ability to keep readers immersed in the story world is fundamental. To keep that attention regularly over an extended period of time is constitutive not only of the audience’s
“migratory behavior”, but also the sustenance of the narrative itself. Through constant updates, the immersive world of a narrative is renewed and continues to be captivating. The construction of effectively immersive worlds is a requirement for successful convergent narratives not just for the sake of the story, but also to encourage interaction and sustained attention. Furthermore, being able to keep an audience ‘on the hook’ of a story – as Tim Dwyer and Frank Rose explain – has a powerful commercial interest in our media ecology. Jennifer Edson Escalas proposes in her study of narrative in marketing that “stories persuade via transportation” (37). A proposition like Escalas’ is pertinent to understand the continuation of convergent narratives since many have a strong market component. As Jenkins’ study shows, oftentimes, convergent narratives are the products of large media corporations; while others, like Orsai, are crowdfunded initiatives.

Seriality also impacts the structure of convergent texts. For Angela Ndalianis, ‘the serial logic of contemporary media is reliant on a rampant self-reflexivity: Each addition to the serial whole is reliant on an intertextual awareness of serial predecessors’ (72). By establishing an ongoing, serial dynamic, the structure of convergent narratives is also affected, as all the components must be interconnected in some way to build the whole immersive environment. Establishing connections between media components in a serialized narrative is one way in which media convergence and intermediality imply each other reciprocally too. Karin Littau makes a point similar to mine. Seriality, she says, “also has an impact on aesthetics; for, if form and content cannot be neatly separated from each other, nor from the medium in which they are housed, this means that borrowings between serial fragments are never only intertextual they are also intermedial” (Littau, “Alien,” 29). Underlying the serialized forward movement is a process of proposition of the narrative as it unfolds, that is, the story is not necessarily already predetermined, but might evolve as developments are welcome or not by the audience. Seriality is, thus, also conductive of a metafictional form of reader engagement. The possibility of affecting the narrative as it develops is also on the hands of the readers who, thus, gain an increased prominence in the fiction making. Reader involvement in convergent narratives is not just as a mental recreation of a story, but also an actual form
of participation, a rather literal form of actualization. Gwenllian-Jones’ and Pearson’s serial “metatext”, I propose, is the environment of metafictional reader engagement grounded not just spatially but also temporally.

To conclude this chapter I want to retell José Antonio Millán’s account of the everyday process of reading: “on your way to work you being reading this article in your smartphone, when you take a break you continue reading it on your desktop, and finish it comfortably on your iPad tucked in your bed” (“Leyendo pantallas”, translation mine). What Millán is describing is the many points of access, all of them part of our everyday lives, in which we access sustainedly a narrative, in other words, the ubiquity of narrative in media convergence. As can be seen from my discussion in this chapter, one of the most important aspects of media convergence is the way in which the various media forms have had an impact on the consumption of narrative. The participatory role assigned to readers also has a profound effect on narrative creation both formally and thematically. As a matter of fact, “to change the physical form of the artifact is not merely to change the act of reading (although that too has consequences the importance of which we are only beginning to recognize) but profoundly to transform the metaphoric network structuring the relationship of word to world” (Hayles, Writing Machines 23).

Thanks to the familiarity of media convergence, story is entering the everyday lives of people in a more immediate manner than we have seen before. The different materialities of convergent texts incite, first, an awareness of the narrative objects and, secondly, a closeness to it. In our current media ecology, self-reflexivity and self-referentiality are leading towards a metafictional mode of engaging with narratives as shared experience. The sociality of stories is also becoming a recurrent characteristic of our many convergent and intermedial narratives, and it is simultaneously fostered and required by these stories. The apparently ubiquitous presence of a story has revealed the way we relate to narrative art as a true part of our lives and, consequently, is unveiling the ease with which people start inhabiting stories and relate not just to the world proposed by them, but also to others partaking in the story creation. In other words, there is a literalization of metafiction being staged on media convergence in which through diverse media and for a long period of time we negotiate distinct levels of narrative and the here-
and-now. An exploration of how this takes place in particular examples must be proposed in order to appreciate the means through which intermediality and media convergence are affecting the production of narrative on the level of creation (particular structures, for instance) and on the level of recreation (how readers make out the narrative and relate to it). A close examination of these phenomena will also shed light upon the building blocks of the success enjoyed by convergent narratives as distinct products of our days.
Chapter 3

3 On Interstory

In this chapter I draw from the theoretical background established in the previous two chapters to advance the concept of interstory. Interstory, I suggest, is an emergent global narrative constituted of a network of story pieces published in different media and brought together by readers following the textual and medial links laid out by an author or editor. I use global in this context, not as a geographical referent, but as a demarcation of the scope of the world created by interstory. The global narrative – the world of the story – takes shape contingently out of the combinations, done by readers, of its smaller components. Interstory, thus, encompasses two levels of narration: one is the small story pieces; the other – the global narrative – is the readers’ sum of them. The detailed characteristics of interstory are tried out and elaborated in the meticulous study of Orsai in light of the proposed three-layer medium. Before that, however, I wish to briefly recapitulate the points on which this definition rests.

From chapter 1 I bring forward two theoretical clusters. The first is the idea that we get involved so deeply with narrative fiction because we process it through the same cognitive mechanisms as real life; that is, we undergo a live experience of stories. This goes against the conventional ontological divide between reality and fiction giving way, instead, to a spectrum of different levels of reality. We navigate other realities, like fictional worlds, through metarepresentation: the cognitive apparatus in charge of categorizing and tagging the source of any given information. Metarepresentation allows us both to take part in fictional worlds, and to distinguish them as such: it is a third space where narrated worlds and our world meet. The second is that stories stem out of a social drive to share information and relate to others through them. Because they are so prevalent throughout cultures and time, stories have been adapted and evolved along every media that has ever been invented in human history from oral language to digital devices. Technological developments, therefore, do not go against the humanness of narrative stories but provide new means for new instantiations, bringing about the opportunity of new narrative forms and new ways of audience involvement.
From Chapter 2 I draw the proposition that digital media is but another stage on which storytelling takes place. The particularities of digital media doubtless have an effect on how narrative is created, distributed and consumed, but the very existence of storytelling is not threatened by it. Because we are living a transitional point in the digital paradigm shift, many literary conventions are currently being reshaped and others are only beginning to be noticed. The availability of new media platforms and its popularity has given way to an explosion of textual and fictional content that offers the unique possibility to observe what kinds of narrative are taking place exactly as they develop.

The premises outlined so far in this thesis converge in the notion of metafiction as a form of narrative engagement that I advance in my concept of interstory. Key characteristics of metafictional writing can be closely traced back to our cognitive mechanism of metarepresentation and the way in which we project ourselves onto stories. Immersion is heightened and even literalized because of the interactive capabilities of some digital media, and has thus blurred the boundaries between narrated world and real world. Finally, because media platforms and devices have become so ubiquitous in our everyday life, so have the stories contained in them. Interstories, delivered through several platforms, accessed through several devices are constantly present. Their serialized structure also favors a sense of pervasiveness. This facilitates an apparently closer relationship between the reader and the narrated world. Whether this relationship is real or an artifact of fiction making – as it usually is in metafictional writing – might be determined by the different roles a reader might take in the narrated world apropos digital media interactivity, its spilling into everyday life and, finally, by its physical correlates.

The three-layer concept of medium, a composite of notions used in media convergence and intermediality studies proposed before is the basis for my elaboration of interstory. Medium in interstory is understood as a three-layer concept comprised of a semiotic phenomenon, a channel/technology of communication, and the social/cultural behavior associated with them. In the concept of interstory, the three layers of medium are relevant to different aspects of narrative creation, distribution and consumption. Although interrelated in multiple ways in narrative discourse, I wish to start with a working characterization of interstory using a somewhat arbitrary division of functions of
medium. ‘Internally’, medium is the semiotic material (text, image, moving image, sound recordings) encoding a narrative discourse. ‘Externally’, medium is the behavior it fosters on readers following the story. In between, crossing from one end to the other, is medium as technology or channel of communication, which both shapes the narrative discourse and makes it accessible for readers and authors to act on it. As my argument unfolds, I examine how these three layers imply one another and progressively shape the development of the narrative on all levels. As a matter of fact in the definition of interstory below, it is already apparent that these three layers operate in an undifferentiated fashion.

3.1 Interstory

I come back to the opening definition of interstory: an emergent global narrative that takes shape in the combination of a network of smaller story pieces published in different media and brought together by readers who follow textual and medial links. From this initial definition a series of detailed characteristics and implications unfolds. Most evidently is the fact that due to its various composition and publishing media, interstories require the use of several devices, objects or artifacts for readers to follow the narrative’s development. As a result, the active participation of the readers is fundamental to put together the pieces of the story. Because these various fragments are rendered through different platforms, the narrative exists outside of a single contained medium (as it usually happens with a print book or a film) and is found in many of the platforms with which we interact on a regular basis.

Despite its fragmented structure, the network giving way to the emergence of the global narrative is held together by a referent system between distinct mediapieces: some of them are intertextual, such as direct mentions to other pieces; or remedial, like the repetition of the same piece in another medium with different characteristics. This referent system is singular inasmuch as all the pieces constitute a networked global narrative, referents linking the various pieces are actually self-referential. One piece might refer to another one, but that exchange is still demarcated by the global narrative.
The tightly linked self-referential narrative and the plurality of media outline an immersive environment where the global story develops and within which readers can navigate the story – the third space of metafiction. Finally, in interstory, pieces are presented serially, which maintains the development of a still unfinished global plot maintaining reader attention and fostering further narrative engagement.

Interstories are a clear product of media convergence and intermediality. They are also a theoretical development of transmedia storytelling, not just in terms of the flow of content through platforms and the audience behavior this fosters, but also in terms of being a commercial and marketing mechanism. The immersive environment created by the narrative dispersed in various media platforms and the self-referential linking apparatus lay the ground for cross consumption. Likewise, seriality supports the continuous return of the audience. Interstories, however, differ from the transmedia storytelling examples studied by Henry Jenkins inasmuch as they are not promoted by transnational media conglomerates. The media structure might be similar, but the development of a loyal audience cannot be attributed to a big commercial push and a media superstructure already in place. Quite the contrary, each one with its own particularities, Jeff Hull’s and his group of “situational designers” Nonchalance, Tim Ferris’ The 4-Hour Chef, and the study case in this research, Hernán Casciari’s Orsai have started with no other media infrastructure but a blog, a website or, in Hull’s case, as street art. Their success has relied on the narrative capabilities to capture the readers’ attention and interest to follow and fund the projects, even when their conditions are at times quite capricious. These examples have gained social meaning as they come into being thanks to their audiences. Aside from the materialization and continuity of the projects, the success of interstories can be seen in the formation of communities around them. An apparent by-product of interstories, some of the communities formed around them have flourished to the point of becoming part of the story itself as is the case of Orsai readers. The increasing involvement and presence of Orsai readers in the global narrative triggers a sort of metafictional turn of reader prominence and unstable boundaries between narrated and real worlds.

Up until now, my characterization of the proposed phenomenon has remained on the
theoretical level drawing from cognitive, narrative, literary, as well as media studies. In
the following pages, however, I explore Hernán Casciari’s and Christian Basili’s *Orsai* as
a case study in which the set of interstory characteristics outlined above can be clearly
observed. Although *Orsai*, as a stand-alone blog is almost ten years old, the larger
convergent project is only in its third year. This study focuses exclusively on the period
covering September 23rd, 2010 when *Orsai* ventured outside the blog realm into print and
other electronic renderings until January 15th, 2013. At the time of writing this study, the
first half of 2013, *Orsai* is constituted by a website containing three blogs, a sales point,
and a web magazine, a print magazine, an iPad application, a bar, a publishing house, and
the newly instituted Universidad Orsai - a series of writing workshops. Although the
anchor project continues to be the print magazine, all of the other *Orsai* components have
grown around it so much, that it is hard to tell whether there is really a central project.
Also, because of the way the different smaller projects have developed a good portion of
*Orsai* is about *Orsai* itself. As a matter of fact, the thread uniting the diverse sub-projects
of *Orsai* is the global narrative of the larger project.

The proliferation of media, as suggested above, implies the use of several devices or
platforms to access the different embodiments of *Orsai*. As I argue below, it is the use of
many devices not constrained to a single field of human action (work-home, indoors-
outdoors) that propitiates the formation of an immersive, even spatialized, environment.
*Orsai* can be found in and accessed through various media, various materialities: not just
a print magazine, not just an iPad application, not just a website, but also face-to-face in
the bar and now the workshops. The reader is surrounded by various *Orsai* materials,
immersed in them and partaking of them in several ways. In the case of the OrsaiBar this
is even more evident; the existence of an actual location gives the project a grounding
that literalizes all kinds of narrative interactions.

In the following pages I first offer a short history of the development of *Orsai* before and
after the print magazine. Then I examine how the distribution and sales system of the
print magazine has not only characterized the project but also relied heavily on the global
narrative of the project. The importance of distribution modes can be seen in how much
they have impacted the types of content published in the blogs, or the different versions
of the magazine. Interestingly, touching both the narrative and the distribution as persuasion and selling strategy has been the inclusion of the readers as participative agents in the making of Orsai. The many tactics through which readers have been involved in Orsai are also dealt with in detail. An important part of the analysis explores how much of the contents of Orsai are devoted or adjacent to the happenings of the project itself. A close look at the writing’s genres sheds light on this and be complemented with textual and narratological explorations. The aim is to unearth the mechanisms through which the global Orsai narrative keeps its cohesion throughout its media fragments. Among them, the most salient ones are remediation as ‘almost’ repetition, and intertextuality as linking, allusion and direct mention.

The outcome of these mechanisms, and the inclusion of readers as part of the narrative, I sustain, is a self-referential turn of the project’s narrative, characteristic of interstories and resembling metafiction. The global narrative coming out of its connected smaller components, combined with the multiplicity of media platforms and devices used to access it, and the interactive (commenting) capabilities granted by the three blogs and the web magazine, have fostered an environment of commonality between Orsai’s readers. As a matter of fact, in the comments sections of blogs and web magazine, for a while now it has been possible to observe the formation of an online community since reader interactions are not constrained to the reader-author schema; but have expanded to reader-reader interactions and occur in a distinguishable pattern. I wrap up the chapter with the proposition that both narrative and media components in an interstory like Orsai shape a distinct type of metafictional narrative involvement that keeps the global narrative moving forward, maintains the enterprise sustainable through the sociality it fosters in its readers.

### 3.2 Methodology

Because of the scale that Orsai has reached over the two-year period I am studying, the amount of text and data to be put under consideration demands a different approach than just close reading. As a matter of fact, the dimension Orsai has reached cannot be justly
examined through textual analysis alone. This chapter combines the theoretical approaches sketched before with the close reading of *Orsai*’s texts, and a computational and quantitative analysis of the large-scale project. The total numbers of *Orsai* are stated in Table 1.

**Table 1 The total numbers of data analyzed (*Orsai* from September 2010 to January 2013).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data types</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main texts or pieces</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>Blog posts, magazine articles, short stories, chronicles, comics, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>OrsaiBlog, OrsaiBar, Redacción, Web Magazine and Print Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>Those who have had a main text published in any of the five media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readers</td>
<td>6,833 (plus anonymous)</td>
<td>Those who have commented on any of the blogs or the web magazine,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>41,616</td>
<td>Reader comments left in any of the main texts published in the three blogs or the web magazine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the computational analysis a graph database has been built using the web service SylvaDB (sylvadb.com). The structure of the database has been organized according to the schema in Fig. 1 with node types ‘Author’, ‘Piece’, ‘Medium’, ‘Reader’ and ‘Comment’.
Worth noting from the schema is the differentiation of ‘piece’ from ‘comment’. A ‘piece’ or ‘main text’ is published in any of Orsai’s media having undergone a process of edition; a comment is left also in Orsai but is not edited and is directed to, and sparked by, a ‘main text’. The category, ‘author’ refers only to the writers and not the illustrators published in Orsai. This distinction is not aimed at dismissing the importance of the artwork included in the magazine. In the narrative focus of my study, however, analysis of graphic content is out of scope. Media – considered only as channels of communication – have been grouped into five: OrsaiBlog, Redacción (editorial department), OrsaiBar, Web Magazine, and Print Magazine. Other electronic renderings of Orsai have not been put separately as they are a pretty close repetition of content to the print version as in the case of the PDF versions. The iPad versions do offer a distinct reading experience and approach to the project, much different from the web or print.
editions; nevertheless, their appearances have been, until recently, too sporadic to be studied as systematically as the others and, therefore, have not been included in the database either. Nevertheless, the data and the texts under consideration in the present chapter account for only the portion of the schema in Fig. 2.

**Figure 2 Portion of the graph database used in Chapter 2**

The different components of *Orsai* have been abstractly modeled into node types and relationships according to how the project is structurally organized and the ways in which it has been published. Relations are established semantically, for example, all of the ‘pieces’ have been ‘written’ by an ‘author’, and ‘published’ in a ‘medium of publication’. Other attributes have been added to each piece, such as date of publication and genre as indicated in the *Orsai* archives.

Furthermore, most of my study focuses on the global narrative of *Orsai* and much less on individual articles, especially those not written by the editors. The rest of the magazine texts are being examined with different levels of detail. Some of them become relevant as part of a group, or genre indicative of the editors’ or readers’ practices; while others stand out due to the relevance of their content. Visualizations resulting from the computational analysis of the project have shed much light in the dynamics at work in *Orsai* and led some of the questions; they also illustrate and support my arguments. Incorporated along the analysis, visualizations based on attributes and not just node type shed more light into the inner workings and dynamics of the whole project. As a result, a back and forth dynamic between computational analysis and close reading has led the entire research process. In cases where close reading suggested any kind of relevance regarding, for instance, authorship, narrative inflections, etc., a more detailed computational analysis
was carried out. Conversely, in cases where computational analysis suggested a visible pattern, a close inspection of the textual components was carried out.

The visualizations used in this chapter have been generated using the open source software Gephi (gephi.org). The original graph database built on SylvaDB was exported as a .gexf file into Gephi, where different layout algorithms were applied to it with the purpose of observing diverse dynamics and relations between the database components. The Force Atlas and Force Atlas 2 algorithms have been used to highlight the centrality of some of the project components, the closeness of diverse pieces and to explore non-obvious patterns of association. Fruchterman Reingold has been used to show the diversity as well as similarities of attributes among the components of the database. Accompanying each visualization there is a thorough explanation of what is being explored and analyzed in each one of them.

### 3.3 The Development of Orsai

“Lo que empezó siendo un blog puede convertirse en cualquier cosa” (“What started out as a blog might become anything”)

5. This is the tagline one can find at the homepage of the current Orsai website (editorialorsai.com). With these words, Hernán Casciari succinctly summarizes the story of a blog that became a print magazine, an electronic magazine, a publishing house, a bar, a podcast, and iPad application, a ‘university’, and in many ways an online/offline community in itself. For those of us following the project for at least over a year, the tagline is also a wink to the electronic migration Orsai went through from a regular blog site at the bitacoras.com domain, to its current convergent site. This change saw the project expand from one blog to three blogs and a web magazine section. The move, no doubt, obeyed the increasing demands of the changing project, but it probably had much to do with the overflow of readers eager to participate in Orsai in as many ways as possible.

5 All of the translations into English from Orsai are mine.
Orsai has been characterized by media change. As a matter of fact, the move to editorialorsai.com was not the first time Orsai underwent major media transformations. Orsai stayed a rather standard blog for several years (2004-2010); one-directional media transformations from screen to print were not uncommon as many blog posts were re-edited by Casciari and collected in his print books España decí alpiste (2008) and El pibe que arruinaba las fotos (2009). The blog was radically rearranged during the last quarter of 2010 when the magazine was first projected and announced. orsai.bitacoras.com stopped being just a blog and was split into two sites: one remained an all-containing blog, the other a sort of sales point for the print magazine. The two sites were so closely interwoven and there was so much overlapping and mutual referencing and linking that they could hardly be regarded as two sites. To a great extent both sites had become ‘the backstage’ of the main enterprise: the print magazine, “Y así es como… Orsai se transformará, el día sábado uno de enero de 2011, …en la revista Orsai. Y este blog se convierte, desde hoy, en el detrás de escena, en el backstage de ese sueño” (“And thus, Orsai will become, on January first, 2011, Orsai magazine. And starting today, this blog turns into the behind the scenes, the backstage of this dream”; “Matar la crisis a volantazos”). Since then, every new media or adjustment to Orsai have been proposed and incorporated to the larger project through the blog; these developments have also been incorporated into Orsai’s narrative. For Casciari, the budding idea behind the project “was to develop a uniquely direct relationship between authors and readers – one which would cut out the obsolescent 20th-century middle men” (Quijones, par. 11). The blog has become a forum of exchange with Orsai readers and the response has been staggering.

The print magazine came out in January 2011. Orsai N1 sold over ten thousand print copies. Out of it, a few electronic versions became available: a kindle version, now unavailable but re-launched for later issues; an iPad version that has now been refashioned; a PDF version that was posted for free download on the blog itself and, later on through issuu.com; and finally, a web version that was only publicized on the very last page of the print magazine:

los lectores que tengan ganas de dejar comentarios en los textos y crónicas
de este número, pueden entrar a ORSAI.ES/N1. Allí hay un foro para cada texto, un sistema de comentarios y la posibilidad de que cada autor, si quiere, pueda conversar con sus lectores. (*Orsai* N1, 206)

Readers who wish to leave comments on this issue’s texts and chronicles, can go to ORSAI.ES/N1. There is a forum for each text, a comment system and the possibility for each author, if he/she wants, to chat with their readers.

As can be seen, the web version was distinct from all the other electronic renderings in that it took the form of a blog too, i.e. it offered readers the possibility of commenting directly into each piece as they could on OrsaiBlog entries. Nevertheless, the web version did not include all of the texts in the magazine.

Inadvertently, however, because of the proliferation of media platforms related to *Orsai* and the constant references to its different versions, little by little and increasingly more with every issue, the backstage narrative of the project came to the forefront. As the frame containing the print magazine, and responsible for encouraging readers to support it – the narrative of *Orsai*, the story of its production, edition and distribution ended up overshadowing everything else. At that point it became evident that *Orsai* was, to a large extent, about *Orsai*. The popularity of the project and, indeed, the huge involvement of its readers granted the print magazine continuity, even when it was not originally contemplated to go past the fourth issue. Very much infatuated with the project’s narrative, readers pushed the story forward — and kept the production of the magazine going. As Comequechu, one of the project’s collaborators warned both Casciari and Basilis, “La revista no se toca, ya no es tuya. No la hicieron ustedes solos” (“You can’t touch the magazine. It’s not yours anymore. You didn’t make it on your own”; “Bar Mediante”). The level of economic security granted by a considerable number of readers allowed Casciari, Basilis and other collaborators both to take the print magazine into its second year and to develop the project further.

The first addition was OrsaiBar. Interestingly, any addition to the project is also an addition to the narrative, “tengo muchas ganas de ir contando, desde hoy y cada jueves, el backstage de cómo se monta, a la distancia, el mejor bar de Buenos Aires” (“I really want to tell, starting today, each Thursday, the backstage of how, at a distance, the best bar in
Buenos Aires comes to be”; “Bar mediante”). After Orsai was moved to editorialorsai.com in early 2012, OrsaiBar got its own blog in the convergent site dedicated to events taking place there. Some of the posts originally published in the first blog were migrated to OrsaiBar.

Similarly, by the end of 2011, aside from the print magazine, for a few months Orsai had started editing books: Casciari’s own and, the illustrator, Horacio Altuna’s in June. The prominence of Orsai as a larger project became much more evident at the end of 2011 when the much anticipated Editorial Orsai was announced. Supported by the economic push of more than five thousand magazine’s subscribers’, Editorial Orsai would open up to other writers, not just their past collaborators, and rely on the readers’ assessment to pick out publishable works. Although up to now this model has not yet been implemented, at the time, the proposal was successful in persuading over five thousand readers to buy a yearly subscription, thus ensuring the sustainability of the print magazine. These developments have been possible to visualize through the graph database. In the following set of images we can see the development of Orsai from just a blog in 2010 in Fig. 3, to a much larger project involving the blog and the print and the web magazines in 2011 in Fig. 4, to an even more complex one including the different blogs in 2012 in Fig. 5.
The scope of *Orsai* with only one medium and one author was still rather limited while it was still only a blog.

*Figure 3 Orsai in 2010.*
Figure 4 *Orsai* in 2011.

The project’s network becomes a much larger and complex as the print magazine and the web magazine are incorporated in 2011.
Figure 5 *Orsai* in 2012.

The media ecology of *Orsai* further develops in 2012 with the move to editorialorsai.com and the division of blogs.

The increasing complexity of the project has not only influenced the number of publication media, but also the many authors that have collaborated with the project and the growing global narrative. As I proposed above, an interstory consists of one uniting narrative or story published in various media pieces, in *Orsai* that global narrative is the very unfolding of the project, and the story is also the history of its media additions.
The relationships between Orsai’s narrative components can be complementary, episodic and reiterative depending on where we read them. Turning points in the narrative of Orsai have also been crucial moments of the project’s media developments: the magazine, the iPad application, as well as new forms of distribution, etc. As a consequence, key episodes for the project have been the passage from blog to print magazine, from print magazine to e-magazine, opening OrsaiBar, the embargo suffered in Argentina late in 2012, and finally the transition from blog-magazine to publishing house. These episodes do not just deal with media changes in the project; they also stage it by appearing in interconnected fragments in those very media. The ways in which readers have been able to buy a print magazine or partake in other aspects of the project have filled both page and screen.

Along with the different media used in Orsai, another aspect that has changed as the project has developed is the distribution and sales system. Although smaller changes have been made in-between, sales and distribution strategies have been constant for each year of publication. Just like it happened during late 2010 when the magazine was upstarted and projected to go on during the following year; in late 2011, Orsai was re-launched for 2012. Sales and distribution systems, as it might be expected have not only had an effect on pricing and technical editorial details such as type of paper, number of pages, and number of issues (four during 2011, six during 2012). It has also evidently impacted the kind of content published in the blog and the magazine and some of its literary features. For example, the framing narratives: entrada (appetizer) and sobremesa (a sort of after-meal conversation) which ‘bookend’ each article, interview, review, comic or short story from N1 to N4 were reduced – and were completely removed in N5. A similar development can be observed regarding the goteos (leaks) published in the blogs and aimed at promoting the content of each new issue. I will come back to this.

3.4 The Narrative Economics of Orsai

Orsai, “the impossible magazine”, was upstarted with Casciari’s own royalty payments from a previous blog-novel Más derecho que soy tu madre, published in print and later on
adapted to theater in Argentina. The initial investment allowed the editors to devise the print magazine with no advertisements at all – a radical shift from most periodicals – and a production/distribution system non-dependent on large publishing houses. In other words, the impossibility of the magazine came out of making it with no intermediaries. The distancing from traditional publishing was so radical that, in order to focus on the new phase of Orsai, Casciari ended his commitments with the widely read newspapers El País (Spain) and La Nación (Argentina) and with the publishing houses Sudamericana (Argentina), Grijalbo (Mexico) and Plaza & Janés (Spain). Severing all advertisement commitments from the magazine was outlined as a liberating move for the writing space:

No puede ser posible que cuando las cosas le van muy bien a las empresas tengas que escribir menos – porque entra publicidad – y cuando las cosas le van mal a las empresas tengas que escribir menos – porque le quitan páginas al diario. ¿Qué tiene que pasar, económicamente hablando, para que los lectores leamos en paz (o para que los periodistas escribamos en paz) un texto de mil palabras? (“Renuncio”)

It is not possible that when things are going really well for companies you have to write less – because there is more publicity – and when things go wrong for companies you have to write less – because pages are taken out of the daily. What ever has to happen, economically speaking, so that readers can be allowed to read (or for writers to write at peace) thousand-word text?

Orsai was proposed as a magazine that would be self-sustained financially just through sales income, and designed, edited, revised, published and distributed by the editors themselves and a small group of collaborators (“Una revista cada 39 segundos”). From the start, all selling matters were managed from Orsai’s site and arranged through PayPal. The magazine was not distributed through regular press vendors or available in large bookstores; instead it was shipped in small scale, packs of ten, all over the world. The editors’ interest in making the project as worldwide as possible devised a rather unusual pricing strategy that would equalize the cost of the print magazine in all Spanish speaking countries and anywhere Orsai was being bought:

Cuando existen países con economías diferentes, es un error pensar en euros, o en dólares, o en pesos, o en soles. Hay que encontrar otra unidad monetaria. Creemos haber encontrado una, a los efectos de simplificar la estrategia de distribución: vamos a pensar en periódicos del sábado.
¿Cuánto cuesta el periódico de mayor tirada en tu país, los sábados? Ésa será nuestra unidad. De ahí partimos. Nuestra moneda, a nivel interno, será el PDS. (“El amigo librero”)

When there are countries with different economies, it is a mistake to think in euros, or dollars, or in pesos, or in soles. There has to be another currency. We believe we have found one so that we can simplify the distribution strategy: let’s think about Saturday newspapers.

How much is the most widely distributed Saturday newspaper in your country? That will be the unit. We start from there. Our currency, internally, will be the $NP.

The price of the print magazine was set at 15$NP, which made a print Orsai copy as cheap as the equivalent of $0.09 in Cuba, and as expensive as $25.00 in Switzerland. To facilitate distribution and lower shipping costs independent booksellers on the one hand, and on the other, groups of readers were in charge of getting together, “Estamos organizando una estructura de distribución en donde ustedes, los cientos de lectores que llenaron de comentarios el texto anterior, tienen muchísimo que ver. Una red entre los lectores y los libreros” (“We’re organizing a distribution structure which has a lot to do with you, the hundreds of reader who filled the last post with your comments. A network of reader and booksellers”; “Renuncio”). More than being an example of crowd-funding to launch the magazine into the world as a large project, Orsai has been a crowd-sourced effort. The condition of selling the print magazine in packs of ten triggered a dynamic in which readers, anxious to partake in the project were seeking each other through blog comments: “Los futuros lectores de la revista Orsai están actuando de una forma inesperada: se buscan entre ellos. "¿Alguien en Suiza?", dicen. "Ya somos siete en Comodoro Rivadavia”, gritan. Quieren comprarla en packs de diez. Yo no había visto eso nunca” (“Future Orsai magazine readers are acting unexpectedly: they are seeking each other. ‘Anybody in Switzerland?’, they say. ‘There’s seven of us in Comodoro Rivadavia’, they scream. They want to buy packs of ten. I had never seen that before”; “A caballo”). Collaboration, even in buying the magazine was a feature of the readers’ behavior and, thus, financially, the print magazine relied on the readers’ ‘patronage’ to keep going, even though the startup investment, as I mentioned above came from Casciari himself. Group and community making, and word-of-mouth advertising in
person and through social media was the basis for the success of the project in its first few months,

Ustedes hicieron todo el quilombo en Twitter, todo el escándalo en Facebook, todo un escombro brutal con el boca a boca. Hicieron y hacen tanta bandera que aquellos autores e ilustradores que sospechábamos lejanos, inaccesibles, carísimos o inalcanzables, ya conocían el proyecto y – algunos, incluso – esperaban ser convocados (‘A caballo’).

You made all the fuss on Twitter, all the stir on Facebook, a total word of mouth uproar. You were and are being so loud that even the authors and illustrators who we thought impossible, inaccessible, too expensive or unreachable, knew about the project already, and some even, were waiting to be asked to participate.

Most interestingly, the success of the magazine was not only characterized by how many copies were sold, but more significantly by the willingness of renowned authors and illustrators to collaborate in a budding project.

Nonetheless, the crowd-sourcing model made Orsai sustainable up to a certain extent. To make the print magazine a sought after object, the editors aimed to turn print Orsai into a collector’s item and vowed to print only the exact number of copies already prepaid, “vamos a imprimir solamente los pedidos que hagan ustedes hasta el 10 de diciembre” (“We are going to print only the preorders you have done until December 10”; “La pirámide invertida”). This clever move added a sense of urgency to those undecided, both readers and booksellers, about buying their copy. Nevertheless as a marketing – and even as a narrative – strategy, it was hard to replicate for each issue. It became evident that the number of copies sold by each issue was rapid-changing and demanded, so to speak, individual attention and careful management to maintain the initial levels of reader enthusiasm. In Orsai, as in many other projects, the starting energetic push generated by crowd-sourced ventures proved hard to maintain past the first few months. The resulting swings in sales were very evident: Orsai N1 sold 10,080 copies, N2 print run was only 6,000, N3 raised it to 10,000 copies and N4 stayed at 7,000. The radical decrease in the number of copies sold from N1 to N2 is perhaps the clearest token of how demanding and unstable this strategy was in the long run. For the second year, in contrast, Casciari turned to a rather traditional yearly subscription model, though still keeping the magazine
advertisement free.

The second year of print publication for Orsai sought to replicate, through a subscription mode, a more clearly outlined crowd-funding system. Although the aim was not to upstart the print magazine anymore, now the six projected issues constituted a serialized whole — an entire project on its own. The editors were thus interested in four main things: 1) keeping the project equally and regularly sustainable through the entire year; 2) basing the content of the magazine on a steady staff composed mainly of the initial collaborators, a handful of authors featured during year one of Orsai and a few new authors/illustrators; 3) publishing serialized narratives that were split over the six issues; and 4) upstarting Editorial Orsai as crowd-sourced and crowd-funded publishing model. With this mindset, at the end of 2011 Casciari called for five thousand readers to launch the second year of the Orsai dream:

¿Cuántos lectores de esas características se necesitan para empezar a soñar? Por lo menos cinco mil. ¿Por qué esa cifra y no otra? Porque esa cantidad de suscriptores anuales (ese capital inicial) nos asegura que podremos pagarle, puntualmente, a todos los narradores e ilustradores de la revista, y generar fuentes de trabajo para otro montón de narradores e ilustradores talentosos y desconocidos de nuestros países. (“Una lengua común”)

How many readers with these characteristics are needed to start dreaming? At least, five thousand. Why that number and no other? Because that number of yearly subscribers (that initial capital) will ensure that we can pay, on time, each narrator and illustrator in the magazine, and generate employment sources for a different lot of talented narrators and illustrators unknown in our countries.

Having averaged about seven thousand readers during year one, and peaked past the ten thousand mark, calling for five thousand subscribers seemed a sure bet for Orsai. Although the recently minted $NP currency had been substituted by dollars and euros, all of the equalizing local strategies stayed in place to ensure the fair distribution of the magazine. This notwithstanding, gathering the five thousand subscribers proved much more difficult than everyone thought. The reason for this was vocally expressed by readers through the blog comments: the new business model required stronger financial powers from the readers. If during year one, in North America they were spending about
$15 every three months, the request was now a starting investment of about $150. The price adjustment obeyed a series of realizations the editors had during the first year, among them, the difficulty in unifying the shipping costs, as well as extra taxes, in such diverse areas of the world.

The process was also not as transparent as in year one. During the subscription process, the price was calculated individually depending on each reader’s geographical area, chosen dealer, and whether they would claim their magazine from the dealer in person, or required further shipping. In short, the magazine not only became more expensive, but also the project lost some of its spontaneity. A token example of this is that nine days after its announcement on December 12, 2011, Casciari pointed out that the number of subscribers had got to one thousand (“Para tí, Lucía”). In contrast, a year before, during the first two days that sales were open for N1 over two thousand copies were sold (“Una revista cada 39 segundos”). In total numbers one thousand subscribers amounted to six thousand magazines N5-N10; nevertheless there was a clear slow-down in the number of individual readers partaking immediately in the project. In terms of content, the magazine saw big changes too, “en la nueva etapa de Orsai los seis ejemplares estarán entrelazados, habrá historias que empiezan ahora y acaban en diciembre, historietas de largo desarrollo, secciones que funcionan por partes y una estética folletinesca muy siglo diecinueve” (“in the new phase of Orsai, the six issues will be interlaced, there will be stories that start now and will end in December, long-term comics, sections functioning in parts and a very nineteenth century installment aesthetics”; “Que nos valga”).

The fact that the bulk of content in Orsai N5-N10 was now steady sections and serialized narratives also changed the end product. Recurring segments like “Entrevistas a través de la ouija”, “Las aventuras de Cientofante el novelista sin vergüenza” and “No tengo blog” together with installment narratives like “El gran surubí” and “La laguna” gave the individual project a good deal of depth and offered further literary development for the authors. On the other hand, readers were not the target of the same huge array of surprises arriving with each new issue the way it happened in issues N1-N4. Less new content also meant fewer goteo writings in the blog. For issues N1-N4, twenty-six leaks were published in the blog, while for issues N5-N10 only half as many were posted. On April
2012 when the site moved to its current editorialorsai.com domain, and all the posts related to the print magazine became part of Redacción, *goteos* became *apuntes* (notes). An additional nine *apuntes* were published for the duration of year two, still short of the 2011 *goteo* production.

This variation points out that during year one, because of the individual sales and distribution system, there was a sense of urgency to get readers to buy single issues, an anticipation for what was to come was established in the *goteos*, and the narrative of *Orsai* thus became tied to the promotion of what *Orsai* was offering. For year two, in contrast, having ensured a steady readership of 5,700 readers, leaks, now turned notes, might have become either informative or, in Roman Jakobson’s terms, phatic - intended to maintain the social exchange already going on in *Orsai’s* site, but the narrative of the project, certainly, did not rely so much on anticipation as it had done previously.

Similarly, *entra*da and sobremesa pieces that marked issues N1-N4 functioned as a way of maintaining the narrative of the project present in the print magazine as well. Comparable to *goteo* blog posts, *entradas* and *sobremesas* tell the story of print *Orsai* in the making. *Entradas* and *sobremesas* are narrated dialogues in which both, Casciari and Basilis reflect upon the editing process of a given issue. If read together, they largely constitute short stories covering the whole production of the particular issue. How an author was approached, what feelings were awakened by a given piece, how relevant a chronicle is, to what extent a given story ties to the whole of *Orsai*, etc. are the usual subjects of these pieces. In that way, *entradas* and *sobremesas* are complementary not only with *goteo* blog posts, but with the entire backstaging – the narrative – going on in the blogs.

Although *entradas* and *sobremesas* might not have had the same function as *goteos* in selling the magazine, they do reiterate the transparency of the project’s process and satisfies the readers’ appetite to witness it as closely as possible. Their importance was keenly felt when N5 came out in February 2012. Adding to the changes in selling system, number of issues per year, number of pages and content pieces, *Orsai* readers found out that *entradas* and *sobremesas* had been taken out completely. Once the print magazines
had been distributed everywhere, readers flooded any new blog post wondering where entradas and sobremesas had gone, commenting on how much they enjoyed them. Reader pressure was such that for N6, sobremesas made a comeback, “A pedido del público (que casi nos lincha cuando descubrió la ausencia) volvemos a las sobremesas después de cada texto largo” (“By readers’ request (who almost lynched us when they discovered the absence) we bring back sobremesas after every long text”; “Dos de abril”). The return of sobremesas even made it into the cover art of the magazine (Fig. 6). entradas as such, however, were reincorporated only sporadically. In any case, the same type of content is comprised in the sobremesas from N6-N10.

Figure 6 “Sobremesas are back”.

A portion of the cover art in Orsai N6 announcing the return of sobremesa texts. Courtesy of Hernán Casciari.

Entradas, sobremesas and goteos constitute together with a few other types of pieces the transparent narrative of the project in the making. Interwoven with the content pieces of the magazine, this other narrative encompasses all other matters of the project. The fact that they started out as the main persuasion and selling tool during the first few months of Orsai, has not prevented them from becoming the main narrative, the global narrative
under which all the other media and content components gather. It is through selling and distribution strategies that Orsai has taken shape materially and narratively. From what I have examined, financial pressures have had an impact in what gets published, and how it has been used to lure potential readers. As can be seen, distribution modes have had a visible effect on the content published in Orsai, the magazine as well as the blogs. Supported by its readers, Orsai has led its narrative along the most favorable path for the project to be sustainable. Along the way content has been adjusted taking advantage of the readers’ flexible and willing practices.

3.5 Reader Actualization in Orsai

The content pieces of the magazine might be constant or not, but the editorial comment, although diminished from year one to year two, has been kept in place. Just as Casciari has noted that the magazine does not belong just to him and Basilis anymore (“Bar mediante”), its narrative cannot be stopped without arising much reader attention and possibly, since it depends on the readers’ individual investments, causing the demise of the project. Casciari was quick to acknowledge, from N1, that readers were playing a fundamental role in the magazine’s materialization, “En realidad, lo que hacen ustedes es lo mismo que nosotros: juntarse con amigos y parientes alrededor de una mesa, a pensar en una revista imposible, una revista que no puede ser, con mucha gana de que ocurra” (“Really, what you do is the same thing we do: you get together with friends and family around a table, and think about an impossible magazine, a magazine that cannot be unless we are really willing to make it happen”; “Una revista cada 39 segundos”). Even with the shift in distribution for Orsai’s second year, the editors have continued to credit the financial endorsement that thousands of readers have granted them.

No importa si Orsai es una revista. Puede ser también una película, un disco, un libro, un documental o cualquier proyecto financiado por quienes desean que exista. Nuestra historia se parece a muchas: a principios de este año una comunidad de cinco mil setecientos lectores, de veinte países, nos dejó en garantía medio millón de dólares; un promedio de noventa dólares por cabeza.
A cambio le prometimos seis revistas de literatura, historieta y crónica a lo largo de doce meses…. Las versiones impresas no estarían en quioscos: serían entregadas a un grupo de doscientos lectores y ellos se encargarían de repartirla entre los otros cinco mil. Eso nos aseguró un presupuesto holgado para intentar un medio gráfico sin anuncios ni logística tradicional.

Podríamos trabajar tranquilos, sin sobresaltos económicos. (“La fianza”)

It doesn’t matter that Orsai is a magazine. It could also be a movie, a record, a book, a documentary or any other project financed by those who want it to exist. Our story is similar to many: at the beginning of the year a community of five thousand seven hundred readers, from twenty countries, granted us half a million dollars; an average of ninety dollars per person.

In return we promised six magazines full of literature, comics, and chronicles over twelve months…. The print versions would not be on stands, they would be dispatched to a group of about two hundred readers and they would be in charge of delivering it to the other five thousand. That ensured a comfortable budget to try out a print medium with no advertisement or traditional logistics.

We could work at ease, without economic fright.

Because of their importance as sponsors of the project, readers have been widely credited and featured all over Orsai most notably in some of the main texts. Their presence has been felt on many levels: as subjects of a given text, as authors, as part of the recurring staff, and even as protagonists of print and web pages.

As has been proposed in my definition of interstory, the participation and involvement of readers is key to the story’s success but also to establish an environment of narrative engagement not unlike that seen in metafiction. An important reason to involve readers as we have seen so far might be financial. Nevertheless, from a different perspective, I believe it can also be associated with the types of immersive experience readers are hungry for these days. Reader participation is thus the way in which the audience becomes part of an interstory. Because of the medial characteristics of Orsai, the main avenue or reader participation, aside from patronage, is through comments on the project’s website. All three blogs (Orsai, Redacción and OrsaiBar) as well as the Web Magazine come with a comments section that has been prolifically exploited by readers.
and editors alike. Though on a smaller scale, staff and invited writers have also taken advantage of it. Readers’ comments have taken such a prominent place in the project that the website now showcases an individual section in which all the comments to all entries converge. Although a few pieces have received over six hundred comments, the average is above the one hundred mark – still a rather impressive amount. Reader comments have become especially relevant because the project is ongoing and its narrative serialized. Comments push the narrative forward and keep each installment dynamic until the next one is published. As a forward-looking narrative, an interstory like *Orsai* makes it possible for readers to actually have a say in the flow of the project, and, surprisingly, one that does impact it. The return of the *sobremesa* pieces to the print magazine mentioned above is a token of this, albeit a rather significant one as it highlights the importance of certain kinds of contents, those related to *Orsai*, for the reader community. The *sobremesa* episode is symptomatic of how readers want and expect to read about *Orsai*, see through its process of edition and, through the narrative take part of it. The fact that their comments are read, replied to and taken into consideration have, doubtless, kept them coming back, offering more feedback and influencing the development of the project both as it relates to content and to its materiality. I will come back to the well of information going on in the readers’ comments, for now I wish to focus on readers’ engagement with the project through the different ‘episodes’ of *Orsai*.

Aside from the website comments, *Orsai* readers have become present visually both in the print magazine and in the project’s electronic media. One of the most symbolic ones, aimed at thanking the support that made possible the print magazine has been including the readers’ names and pictures in the pages of the magazine. In N1, echoing XIX century’s gazette’s conventions, a list of readers’ names was exhibited, (Fig. 7):

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las páginas 2 y 207 de la revista *Orsai*, en las que generalmente se colocan las publicidades más caras en un medio tradicional, tendrán el nombre de todos los lectores, distribuidores o librerías que hayan comprado al menos un pack. Es decir, la firma de todos los que están haciendo posible un Número 1 antológico. (“La pirámide invertida”)
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pages 2 and 207 of *Orsai* magazine, in which, the most expensive advertisements in a traditional medium are generally located, will show the
names of all the readers and distributors or bookstores that have bought at least one pack. That is, everybody who’s making possible this anthological Number 1 will sign it.

Figure 7 Readers’ and distributors’ names in Orsai N1. Courtesy of Hernán Casciari.

In N2-N4, names were substituted by a collage of readers’ pictures holding a print copy of Orsai (Fig. 8). Over four hundred pictures were sent by readers without request within a month of launching N1, which prompted the editors to include them in the blog as a photo-video followed by the assertion not to include advertisements, “seguimos apostando a un sistema en donde los lectores, y únicamente ellos, financien imprenta, distribución, honorarios de colaboradores y sueldos del staff. Mientras esto siga funcionando bien, la mejor publicidad de Orsai será siempre ésta” (“We are still betting on a system in which readers, and only them, fund the printing, the distribution and the staff and collaborators salaries and honorariums”; “Doce pequeñas noticias”). The pictures from the video among others later on made it into the pages of the print magazine: “¿Y qué habrá en las páginas 2 y 211? Posiblemente muchísimas fotos de lectores con el N1 en la mano” (“What will be on pages 2 and 211? Possibly a lot of pictures of readers holding N1”; “No innovar”). Using readers’ names and pictures emphasized and materialized their involvement with the project, making them, quite literally, a part of it. In return, readers’ commitment to support Orsai became increasingly
more loyal.

Figure 8 Collage of readers’ pictures in *Orsai* N2. Courtesy of Hernán Casciari.

Once more, all the changes *Orsai* underwent meant a shift in what was published in the second and next to last pages of the print magazine. Not filled with readers’ pictures anymore, in year two those pages were taken by Alberto Montt’s illustrations. Nevertheless, readers were not left out. On the contrary, the subscription model and the new website allowed the editors to offer individual profiles through which readers could not only buy their subscription, but also log into *Orsai* to comment throughout the site. Furthermore, an Orsai ID was issued to all subscribers (Fig. 9). This move facilitated the management of subscriptions and somehow gathered and concretized the community that had been in the process of consolidation right on the website. Token perks such as the ID became extra benefits for those sustaining the project but did not shut out readers accessing the magazine from other sources.
Likewise, as the new contents of print Orsai were being decided, Casciari resolved to include a “letters to the editor” section in which, he replies to readers’ inquiries and complaints. Not unlike what he does in the blog comments, Casciari establishes a dialogue with his correspondents. Nevertheless, as explained in the blog, this section was aimed at dealing with confrontational content: “decido en este sencillo acto incorporar seis páginas de «Cartas al Director» en la nueva revista Orsai, con tipografía mínima para que entren muchas respuestas, aunque tengan que leer con lupa” (“I decide with this simple act to incorporate six pages dedicated to “Letters to the Editor” in the new Orsai; it will have minimal typography so as to fit many replies, even if you have to read with a magnifying glass”; “Sr. Director, dos puntos”). In this section, Casciari established, there would be “un Jorge hijo de puta, sin miedo al qué dirán, sin la cortapisa del civismo y con la lengua peliaguda y montaraz” (“a son of a bitch Jorge, who’s not afraid of what anybody thinks, free of civism and wielding a furry and coarse tongue”; “Sr. Director,
dos puntos”). Interestingly, however, Casciari himself recognized the literariness of the concept, which would serve “como desahogo, sí, pero también como ejercicio literario” (“as an outlet, yes, but also as a literary exercise”; “Sr. Director, dos puntos”). The literariness of the ‘Cartas’ section is further emphasized by the use of one of his nicknames “Jorge” to refer to himself. As a matter of fact, a review of both the letters and Casciari’s replies does show their aim at being on the one hand, comical; and on the other, somewhat dramatized. The letters to the editor section in issues 5-10 thus act as a rather fictional(ized) exchange between readers and Casciari that might be replicating the blog, but can also be an extension of that, offering a further literary touch.

There is still one other way in which readers have become part of Orsai that is most immersive: as collaborators and writers. Because of its grassroots origins, from the beginning Casciari recruited the magazine’s staff from close relationships and OrsaiBlog readers from the pre-magazine era: “Barbarita Rubio y Florencia Iglesias son nuestras correctoras. A Barbarita muchos de ustedes la conocen: es lectora prehistórica y comentarista asidua de Los Bertotti y de Orsai. Nos conocimos en 2004, a raíz de mi primer blog” (“Barbarita Rubio and Florencia Iglesias are our new proofreaders. Many of you know Barbarita: she is a prehistoric reader and frequent commenter in Los Bertotti and Orsai. We met in 2004 because of my first blog”; “Una revista cada 39 segundos”). Similarly, some of the writers featured in print Orsai were also originally readers: “a Natalia Méndez, una lectora de Orsai que sabe más que nadie sobre literatura infantil… le pedimos algo que necesitamos con urgencia Chiri y yo: que nos aconseje qué leerles a Nina Casciari y a Julia Basilis, seis y ocho años, respectivamente” (“We asked Natalia Méndez, an Orsai reader who knows more than anybody about children’s literature… for something Chiri and I need urgently: advise on what to read to Nina Casciari and Julia Basilis, six and eight, respectively”; “Ojalá lo entiendan todos”).

Initially, at least with the examples of Barbarita Rubio and Natalia Méndez, the passage from reader to writer/collaborator seemed rather one-directional. Nevertheless, this did not stop there. There are two paradigmatic reader cases, Rodrigo Solís and Juan Sklar, in the story of Orsai that have complicated the relationship between authors and readers to a degree of metafictionality comparable to that seen in Miguel de Unamuno’s Niebla.
Furthermore, taking advantage of the global narrative of the project made up of fragments, instances such as this exhibit the intricate and tight interweavings of Orsai media and narrative.

The fourth issue of the magazine contained a piece called “Bicho” written by Rodrigo Solís. Through a goteo piece “La hermana del amigo”, blog readers were informed that the author of the piece was indeed a fellow reader under the nickname ‘Pildorita de la felicidad’ who was also an avid reader/commenter. Similarly to Rubio and Méndez, Solís, still as a reader and commenter, was invited to publish his chronicle in print Orsai. Through the goteo text, Casciari retold, as is customary, the story of how he and Rodrigo became acquainted, a teaser of what Solís’ own piece was about, the process of how they agreed to publish it in Orsai and, finally, Casciari’s own impressions of it, “es uno de esos lectores virtuales que, a base de mails y charlas online, se convierte en alguien de tu familia” (“He is one of those virtual readers, who over emails and online chats, become part of your family”; “La hermana del amigo”). This particular fact triggered a dynamic in which Solís was at the same time the subject of a blog post and a commenter of it as well. Solís’ double role was further complicated when the web version of his chronicle appeared on the website, in which, as it might be expected, Solís also took the opportunity to comment as ‘Pildorita de la felicidad’ while his author name was attached to the main text. Solís’ role as writer and reader/commenter fluctuated in the screens of the website and only thanks to the commenting dynamics already in place.

As initially projected by Casciari, opening up the web version of the magazine had precisely the intention of including readers into the publication and replicate the dynamics of the blog whenever possible. Nevertheless, that author and reader would be the same person and, consequently, enter in a sort of dialogue might not have been originally expected. There have been a few other authors who have taken the opportunity granted by the web magazine to reply to readers’ comments, but this vertiginous back and forth has only been seen again with Juan Sklar, an even more complex case of metafictional narration involving several Orsai media and weaving an extremely tight and complex narrative involving fictional pieces with real life events and leading up to a concrete issue of the magazine and a few blog posts.
At the center of this *Orsai* episode is Juan Sklar and his short story “El power ranger rojo”, around it is a complex series of small self-referential narratives all converging in the publication of the story in *Orsai N9*. Sklar, a reader, submitted via email his story explaining how he failed to hand it by hand at the end of the *Orsai N8* launch party. Casciari never replied to the submission, but decided to surprise Sklar by publishing it in *Orsai N9*, and framed it with both an *entrada*, “El timbre a las 3”, and a *sobremesa* entitled “Ya está todo inventado”. Furthermore, after the publication of print *Orsai N9*, Casciari also wrote a blog post “El timbre final” in which he copies and explains “El timbre a las 3” from the print magazine and reproduces the original email in which Sklar made his submission. A few days later, Casciari also posted on Redacción “El mail de Juan” where he published Sklar’s speech for the launch party of *Orsai N9* also written in email form.

In this example there are six narratives explaining the process of creation, submission and publication of “El power ranger rojo”; nevertheless their relationship is by no means linear (see Fig. 10). Conversely, we can see at least two main levels of nested narrative: blog posts referring to — and reproducing — emails that deal with the main story.

![Figure 10 The network of Juan Sklar’s episode.](image-url)
All of the narrative fragments involved in Juan Sklar’s episode of coming from different media and clearly interlinked between them. Purple nodes come from print Orsai; yellow nodes from Redacción; red nodes are also published in Redacción by means of the two original posts; and finally, turquoise nodes are only alluded to in the main story.

As if that was not entangled enough, “El power ranger rojo” is, in turn, about another story turned into a movie and it opens:

A mi me gusta escuchar las historias de las historias. O sea, no solo me gusta que me cuenten una historia, también me gusta escuchar cómo nació esa historia. A quién se le ocurrió, por qué se le ocurrió y cómo pasó de ser una idea más o menos sin forma a una historia completa. La que estoy por contar es la historia de una historia. La historia del guión de una película. De mi primera película. (45)

I like listening to a story’s story. That is, not only do I like to be told a story, I also like to hear how that story was born. Who came up with it, and why they came up with it, and how it went from being a formless idea to a whole story. The one I’m about to tell is a story’s story. The story of a movie script. Of my first movie.

Not only do we get to know how Sklar wrote his story within the story itself, but also, because of the many narrative fragments that frame it, we are informed of almost every aspect that went on and led to its publication. Through the many narrative fragments and jumping from one medium to another, both Sklar and Casciari co-create this particular Orsai episode. They also set a challenge for their readers, almost a riddle, to disentangle the relationships between the smaller episodes into a neater narrative thread. This is something addressed playfully by Casciari who at the end of “El mail de Juan” clarified “Aviso. Este texto no tiene mayor sentido si antes no se lee otro llamado El timbre final, publicado en este mismo blog dos o tres días antes” (“Warning. This text makes no sense if you haven’t read another one entitled El timbre final, published on this very blog two or three days before”; “El timbre final”). The title of the alluded post provided the hyperlink further interweaving each distinct piece.

The process of keeping track of “who said what about whom” is one of the most interesting proposals brought into literary studies from neuroscientific research.
Mentioned before, the work of Lisa Zunshine has been instrumental in the study, precisely, of instances of different levels of fictionality as metarepresentation. Metarepresentation is the representation of a representation in our mind. In everyday circumstances it takes the form of “I thought…”, “she said…”, etc. and its function is to help us navigate others’ opinions and the information they hold in regard to our own opinions as well as the information we possess (Zunshine, Why 47). In narrative, metarepresentation has the same function, that is how we know who thinks what and who lied to whom, especially when there is a very strong narrative voice. When seen in this light, an example like Sklar’s and Casciari’s, our metarepresentation capacities are put to the test in order to organize and make sense of the nested narrative, that is, who wrote what about whom. Because of the multiple media platforms in which the story is composed, I would add to the compound of source markers a where it was published.

Through metarepresentation we are also able to understand the original sequence of events in their chronological order, even though most of them have been narrated non-linearly. Additionally, because there is an evident blend between real life events and a highly fictionalized account of them, each new level of narrative complicates the tracking of the story. Even though they might be a starting point to the actual series of events, because of the narrative network built around Sklar’s story and all the intertextual references to each other, it is pretty much impossible to tell where the narration starts. The result is, as suggested above, a tightly interwoven narrative of the creation of a story, an episode of the Orsai project, the process of edition of an issue of the magazine, and even the process of narrative fragmentation and cohesion in the different media; in other words, Sklar’s story is a staging of all the aspects converging in Orsai.

Sklar’s and Solís’ cases suggest that multilevel reader participation is conductive of narrative complexity, self-referentiality and deep levels of metafiction (see Fig. 10) that might, at times, even be hard to keep track of. Sklar’s episode especially highlights the entanglement of connections between Orsai’s media and how that favors the emergence of the global narrative: partly what is narrated, partly what is actual experience, and our engagement with the story. By adding layers to the ‘main’ published story, readers get also a portrait of the author that humanizes him and makes him available beyond a name
and a signature. This is further developed in the comments section of each of the fragments involved, in which dynamics similar to those seen in Solis’ case are seen too. These two cases are also a literalization of the ‘no intermediaries’ policy that gave birth to Orsai: readers become authors, and authors are made available to readers. Furthermore, as I explore below, these networked narratives are only possible thanks to intricate systems of referentiality and intertextuality.

All of the different forms of involving the readers into Orsai provide different levels of engagement with the project’s story. While names and pictures printed on the magazine can be thought of as token retributions not unlike those seen in ‘traditional’ crowd-funded enterprises; the level of participation through comments is much more significant for it has had content and material implications. The inclusion of readers as collaborators and authors has given the project an aura of accessibility and closeness that keeps the readers’ loyalty as they see themselves as its protagonists. Furthermore, if we see the developments of Orsai as a story, the engagement of the readers into the project makes them part of the story too. Their place is no longer separate from the narrative as spectators, but within it as participants. As I had advanced a few pages before, the narrative effect of readers’ involvement resembles that of metafictional writing where readers are granted access to the fiction itself by means of destabilizing the effect and extent of their participation and the boundaries between narrated world and real world. How this involvement is achieved, I suggest, is by means of creating an interactive and immersive environment – the emergent global narrative that demarcates the scope of the project – in which many sorts of reader-author-editor-reader exchanges are not only allowed but sought after.

It should be clear by now that reader involvement in Orsai is determining for the very sustainability of the project. Even though it might seem that Orsai, at this point, is running on its own and that nothing could slow down its development, the truth is that a decrease in readers, especially paying and involved readers, could seriously jeopardize the future of the project. Since it is ruled by a different set of expectations and market environment, an instance like OrsaiBar might not fit into these concerns, but the vivacity of the blog and the economic maintenance of the print publications depend very heavily
on reader participation. Readers’ involvement can be viewed as two complementary functions of *Orsai*’s narrative and mediality: interactivity and immersion. In other words, the deep involvement of the readers with the project is a mark of *Orsai*’s narrative immersive powers, but it is also a result of the easy and generalized forms of interactivity that the website and the face-to-face location offer.

### 3.6 Media Immersion and the Structure of *Orsai*

Let us remember that a degree of narrative transportation or immersion is practically a precondition for the process of world-making necessary to engage in any kind of narrative. World making, narrative immersion, transportation, suspension of disbelief or however we wish to call our involvement with stories, are mental processes non-dependent on the medium through which we access a narrative, but some aspects of it are highlighted or obscured by a particular medium. I wish to propose that in interstory and other transmedia narratives, there is an added layer of immersion in the form of multiple medialities. Aside from the cognitive process already triggered by a narrative, having the story translated from the realm of the book, the cinema screen, or the TV or any other ‘bound’ medium, into ever more quotidian spaces. Because narrative consumption does not take place just in front of a book, not just in front of the TV, not even just in front of the computer screen, the content of interstories travels in and out all of those and into contexts as ubiquitous as our use of media devices.

I argue that in *Orsai*, particularly, the displacement of the story plot into different media, platforms and devices is responsible for the spatialization and, thus, the immersive powers of the narrative. Although as Jay Bolter explains under a rather negative light in *Writing Space*, immersion is an effect, so to speak, that narrative has on naïve readers—“losing oneself in a fictional world is the goal of the naive reader or one who reads as entertainment” (155)—narrative immersion, I insist, is a condition of storytelling. Furthermore, immersion can hardly be set aside as pertaining only to non-critical, passive readers. The active reader dynamics required by *Orsai*, for example, suggests that the narrative is quite persuasive and triggers much reader action. Nonetheless, it is also true
that *Orsai*’s narrative feeds back on its readers’ actions, making the issue of passivity rather irrelevant in the discussion of immersion in interstory. Furthermore, a great deal of the immersion brought about by *Orsai* lies in the fact that its story has been moving forward, thus creating itself textually – virtually, in both the computer mediated and the narrative senses – but also materially, most clearly demonstrated by the print magazine and taken to the extreme in OrsaiBar.

As a matter of fact, several instances of the development of *Orsai* have been articulated narratively as proposals for the readers to support, or as events as they are taking place, and not just as retellings of what has already happened. The shrinking of the time between happening and narration granted by the electronic media has allowed a ‘live’ broadcasting of the story, making readers even more so participants, even if only as witnesses, of it. The presence of narrative content ‘everywhere’ in ‘all the media’ adds that second immersive layer that brings the story of *Orsai*, in this case, into the realm of everyday and ‘real’ life. In the development of *Orsai*, aside from the narrative development, it is possible to observe a tendency towards materialization and actualization.

One of the mechanisms through which immersion is achieved in *Orsai* is interactivity. Following Ryan, in the context of electronic media and, especially virtual reality as computer mediated action interactivity is “the textual mechanisms that enable the reader to affect the "text" as a visible display of signs, and to control the dynamics of its unfolding” (“Virtual Reality,” 17). For Frank Rose, the kind of narrative phenomena we are seeing in our media ecology constitute “[a] new kind of interactive fiction, one that blurred the line between entertainment and advertising, as well as between fiction and reality” (13-14) that is highly immersive, though distinct from the earlier notion of interactive, hypertext fiction. Because of its blog format, even in the web magazine, the dynamics of interactivity in *Orsai* are rather straightforward but they ensure an immediate response from readers as well as quite diverse types of responses. Moreover, the ways in which *Orsai* readers seek to alter the text might not necessarily be on the textual level, but in terms of what the text proposes — a new distribution system, for example, or reverse something they do not agree with as has already been explained.
Textual involvement on the part of readers is much more discrete and takes the form of proofreading, which some readers do practice. On the other hand, the proliferation of comments that grows exponentially after a post is just published might not alter the source text but does alter the page on which we read it. For very involved readers this might mean reading for much longer periods if they want to stay in the loop of what is being talked about. In any case, it shows how readers have made Orsai their own, and to a great degree, having been involved in so many aspects of Orsai, readers are indeed some sort of co-creators.

For Rose, and much before him for Janet Murray, narrative in digital media is increasingly becoming more game-like. Readers immersed in a digital narrative have to act on it and learn “to do the thing that the new environment makes possible” (99). Participation in immersive narratives is not unlike pretend-play. Interestingly, the shift into play from narrative surely traces back to developmental forms of make-believe and allows us to see a continuum between our appetite for other realities as well as for partaking of them. The interactive affordances granted by digital media, in the case of Orsai the blog format filled with comments, appeal to that appetite. If through immersion and interactivity a narrative becomes a game, then this might be seen as a close return to the cognitive origins of the processing of fiction in pretend play. Casciari himself has called the project a game and it is not gratuitous that the name Orsai comes from Argentinian soccer jargon, meaning ‘offside’.

Ludic elements have been a part of the project from the beginning. N1 included among its pages a bookmark with a number to enter a raffle, for example. Nevertheless the most striking gaming goes on because of the readers: the “PRI” (FIRST) game that consists in being the first one to comment on a post immediately after it has been published in any of the blogs or the web magazine. Even though this particular reader behavior does not add much in terms of content to Orsai, it signals the immersive world that has been built by the project in which they partake, and not necessarily related to Orsai itself. It is, so to speak, a different sphere of interaction for readers. Nevertheless, the PRI game goes on for only a few comments to give way to other forms of reader feedback. Apropos the ludic aspect of many current narrative, Rose establishes that:
conventional narratives -- books, movies, TV shows -- are emotionally engaging, but they involve us as spectators. Games are engaging in a different way. They put us at the center of the action: whatever's going on is not just happening to a character on the page or an actor on the screen; it's happening to us. Combine the emotional impact of stories with the first person involvement of games and you can create an extremely powerful experience. (15)

*Orsai*, doubtless, has provided this kind of immersive experience thanks to the easy forms of interactivity granted to readers. For Janet Murray, “calling attention to the process of creation can also enhance the narrative involvement by inviting readers/viewers to imagine themselves in the place of the creator” (40). The narrative of *Orsai* is precisely the process of its creation, made transparent and as synchronous as its media platforms allow it. As I have been arguing so far, that is exactly what has propitiated high levels of reader involvement. In close analysis of the types of pieces that draw larger reader attention it is precisely those dealing with the production of the magazine that awake higher interest.

### 3.7 Self-Referentiality and Intertextuality in *Orsai*

Self-referentiality for Linda Hutcheon in her monograph about metafiction is a form of textual narcissism, a mechanism through which – in her discussion – novels look inwardly at themselves to construct fictions about fiction. For Patricia Waugh, the same kind of discourse constitutes not just self-referentiality but mostly self-consciousness, the mark of metafictional writing for the American critic. For others, like Werner Wolf, an inward-looking tendency – that he names metarefententiality – is characteristic of contemporary art and media. For him metareference is:

>a special, transmedial form of... self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a ‘metalevel’ within an artefact or performance; this self-reference, which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. (*Metareferentiality* 4)

Simply put, metareference as proposed by Wolf is constituted by self-references within a
single text/media system. Even though Wolf does locate his notion of metareferentiality in a transmedial context, the fact that he insists on the idea of a single system complicates his conceptualization since it is not clear what that system is made up of. In other words, it is not clear whether the system is constituted by self-references in an emergent kind of way, or if there is an overarching thread that somehow delimits what constitutes a metareference still within it and what might be without.

In any case, Wolf’s idea of metareferentiality paves the way for my discussion of self-referentiality in Orsai as an intertextual practice giving way to the emergence of the global narrative. Intertextuality is a term first used by Julia Kristeva to refer to the several kinds of relationships among different texts. Among these relationships are allusion, parody, quotation, adaptation and other kinds of transformations like the ones I am interested in here. Used more broadly, for Gérard Genette, intertextuality is “a relation of co-presence between two or more texts, that is to say, eidetically and most often, by the literal presence of one text within another” (8). In the context of post-structuralism from which Kristeva, Genette and others were conceptualizing intertextuality, intertextual relations presupposed two distinct texts, and thus the hidden or not so hidden links between them challenged their discrete (and characteristically authorial) qualities. At its basis, intertextuality constitutes a co-presence between texts separated by time, space, language and author.

In our current media ecology, and especially in interstory, however, the co-presence of texts can be reelaborated as a textual network system. This intersection fosters an added recursive layer of intertextuality. As a result, even the same text rendered in one medium – featuring that particular medium’s potentialities – can self-refer to its twin in another medium with its other particular affordances. What we get, then, is an intertextual self-referentiality. Considering that there is a global narrative in interstories demarcating the scope of the story, the elements conforming it leap from one medium to another in a double movement of intertextuality and self-referentiality. In the case of Orsai, and other similar interstories, this is very evident, since we observe the iteration of a given piece or text in more than one medium, i.e. the print magazine and the web magazine. Each instantiation has the capacity to highlight specific aspects of the texts and favor different
kinds of reader engagement. For example, magazine articles published in either the print or the web magazine are quite different in what they offer. While in the print magazine they are framed by the entrada and sobremesa apparatus, in the web version they allow reader interaction through comments. They are largely the same piece, yet different enough to be distinguished and be able to refer beneficially to its other rendering. Interstory narrative fragments could hardly be considered discrete. Conversely, it is because of their interconnectedness – through self-referentiality and intertextuality – that a global narrative can emerge out of them.

The complexity of this idea lies in the fact that intertextual self-referentiality operates at two levels. On the one hand, it works on the textual, internal level: one piece refers to another – even if it is only another rendering of itself, or through hyperlinks the way it happened in Sklar’s networked episode. The function of this in interstory is to keep the cohesion of the narrative. For Marie-Laure Ryan, intertextuality as first thought of by Kristeva is analogous, even an implementation of “the electronic linking that constitutes the basic mechanism of hypertext” (“Virtual Reality,” 7). Outside of hypertext, in convergent narratives such as interstories, intertextuality works both at a textual level through direct quotations or allusions from one text to another, and as an electronic linking system set in place to hold together part of network of narrative components. On the other hand, it gathers all the components of the global narrative, comprising a space that works externally linking the media platforms as the realm of influence of the narrative. The first is a textual artifact at the level of intermediality: a mention, a hyperlink, an allusion, etc. The second, a consequence of media convergence, is a social function since the links, mentions or allusions lead readers to compile the global narrative on the basis of collecting a given number of textual fragments. This system is also partly responsible for the immersive and interactive qualities of interstory. Interestingly, as we saw during the discussion of immersion and interactivity, for all of these critics, the self-referential turn in media, literature or other arts has a correlation with reader involvement. Self-referentiality leads to self-awareness on the part of readers by means of interacting and compiling the intertextual components as proposed above. These functions of interstory are so tightly interwoven that it becomes pretty much impossible
to tell them apart and see whether they constitute a sequential process or happen simultaneously.

Self-referentiality in *Orsai* is not just a matter of writing/reading about *Orsai*. Doubtless this is a big component, but definitely not the only one. Perhaps the most interesting is how the network of texts is established by means of direct mentions, invitations, digital links, and sometimes even hidden references. There are a variety of texts in charge of carrying out these functions that can be distinguished as self-referential. Both in narrative and textual terms *Orsai*’s self-referential texts keep the cohesion of the global narrative and even, to a large extent, constitute it. That is, the content, the serial episodes and the story of the project itself are contained in self-referential pieces. These texts are the stepping-stones on which readers move around to compile and follow the story along all its media. As Murray states, by calling attention into the creation process, self-referential texts are also responsible for triggering reader’s interest. In *Orsai*, readers become part, and even responsible for the coming into being of the project. Arguably as well, self-referential texts ultimately also lead to the sustainability of the whole project for it is in them where distribution, payment and organizational matters of the project are proposed by the editors and discussed by the readers. To wrap up the discussion of self-referentiality, I would like to take a few paragraphs to explore some of the details of these genres and their implications within the larger network of *Orsai*.

The issue of genres appeared in *Orsai* after the move to the newer editorialorsai.com site in early 2012, which meant a large reorganization of the blog content. Having been part of the general OrsaiBlog, contents related to the magazine had for over a year taken over most of it. When OrsaiBar opened and the publishing house started to operate more regularly, news about them was also published in OrsaiBlog. The new site separated the types of content into the current layout: OrsaiBlog, Redacción, OrsaiBar blog, and Revista (Web Magazine). Depending on their subject, some posts originally published in the main blog were archived either in OrsaiBar or Redacción, but most of them stayed in their original place. A couple of posts was lost, or became inaccessible after the move too.
The new organization was accompanied with a classification of each piece in each blog and the web magazine into a particular genre or section – a refined version of the previous tagging system. Although each blog and the magazine have their own set of categories or genres, I have collected them into a single list since I consider it more important to look at them as a whole in order to observe the network that joins them. The full catalogue is hardly orthodox, and includes such idiosyncratic expressions as ‘introspective chronicle’ and the already mentioned entradas and sobremesas. It also includes much more recognizable genres like ‘narrative chronicle’, ‘profile’, ‘interview’, etc. most of them found on the magazine texts. Each piece in the graph database is marked with the genre that has been indicated by Orsai. From there, after close reading analysis I have initiated a further classification to distinguish the genres dealing with matters of Orsai from those dealing with matters outside of the project. With this in mind I have established a subset of self-referential genres (those dealing with Orsai) that includes entradas, sobremesas, ‘editorial’, ‘leaks’, ‘magazine’, ‘authors’, ‘readers’, ‘notes’, and ‘fragments and advances’. See Table 2.

**Table 2 List of genres published in each Orsai medium.**

Genres highlighted in purple have been marked as self-referential and included in the subset.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revista</th>
<th>Folletín</th>
<th>Folletín</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad</td>
<td>Fragmentos y adelantos</td>
<td>Fragmentos y adelantos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teorías</td>
<td>Historietas</td>
<td>Historietas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vida Privada</td>
<td>Humor gráfico</td>
<td>Humor gráfico</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Novela Gráfica</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perfil de personaje</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relato de ficción</td>
<td>Relato de ficción</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Tiras y viñetas</td>
<td>Tiras y viñetas</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entrada</td>
<td>Cartas al director</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sobremesa</td>
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<td>Cartas al director</td>
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Having established the two main genre subsets I have looked at who the authors are and of which genres. Most of the non-self-referential genres have been written by the guest authors, while self-referential pieces are the realm of Casciari’s and Basili’s own writing, see Fig. 11. It should come as no surprise now that the editors’ writings are for the most part those referring to *Orsai* itself and, as I explained before, constitute the pieces very much responsible for selling and organizing matters of the magazine. In fact, because the editors are the ones ‘inside’ the project, it is only normal that they are the ones in charge of narrating what goes on in *Orsai*.

Distribution analysis has shown that, although they have a great presence in the blogs, self-referential pieces are not exclusive to them. Self-referential pieces also have a very strong presence in the print magazine, especially as *entradas* and *sobremesas* keeping the cohesion of each issue. Conversely, even though the print and the web magazine could be thought of as twin publications, in the web version most of the self-referential pieces have not been included. As a matter of fact during 2011, none of the self-referential pieces from the print magazine, not even the editorials, was made available in the web...
magazine. For 2012, in contrast, the editorials were published in the web magazine while *sobremesas* continued to be kept from this version. This omission gives the web magazine a different network structure as can be observed in the Fig. 12 and Fig. 13.

Figure 11 Casciari and Basilis the two authors of self-referential texts.

In this visualization are included only the Print Magazine and the Web Magazine to show the discrepancies between the apparently ‘twin’ publications.

The reason for the omission has never been stated by the editors. My theorization is, the omission is related to how much self-referential content in the print magazine has already
been published in some way in either OrsaiBlog or Redacción and, consequently, adding it to the adjacent Web Magazine site could seem redundant, especially considering that the general site of the project is already full with narratives of the project. As a matter of fact it is in the blogs where most of the self-referential texts are published. See Fig. 14.

Figure 12 Self-referential texts in the Web Magazine.

Colored in pink, self-referential texts amount to only a small portion, since most of them have been omitted from the web magazine. In this fashion the editors’
contribution to the Web Magazine (in orange) is rather negligible and blend in much more with the other authors’s contributions.

Figure 13 Self-referential texts in PrintOrsai.

In contrast, self-referential texts (in pink) are prominent in Print Orsai and so are both editors who have penned together and separately practically all of the self-referential pieces in this medium. Their presence in the print magazine is much more prominent in comparison to the other contributors.
Figure 14 Self-referential texts in the three blogs.

Also markes in pink here, self-referential texts constitute a large portion of the content published in the three blogs. Again, a larg majority of this content is written by both editors.

Considering this, it is possible to argue that there is an equivalence between blog posts relating to the magazine and the *entradas* and *sobremesas*, i.e. a spilling of the blog content into the print medium establishing a direct route of content flow. When discussing the content and tone of the magazine, Casciari has stated that “Orsai, la
revista, no podía ser diferente al blog” (“Orsai, the magazine, could not be different from the blog”; “Ojalá lo entiendan todos”); this idea could further be taken to the issue of genres in order to explain the omission of these pieces in the web version.

Quantitative explorations showed that self-referential pieces amount to almost 40% of the total number of writings published in the period covering September 2010 to January 2013 (Fig. 15 and 16). This confirms how Orsai is the main story being told around the project’s different media. Coming back to the issue of distribution, it also sheds light into how big an effort it is for the editors to keep readers interested in the project so as to keep it going and make it financially sustainable. As seen previously, much of their presence in the project has been done through the self-referential pieces, especially those categorized as “readers”, but also the ones where readers have become collaborators of Orsai. As was explored, self-referential pieces are the ones that keep the cohesion of the narrative spread in all of the media platforms and in fact the ones that contain the story of Orsai, in other words the whole project is held together by means of its narrative.

Self-referential texts are responsible for creating the world of Orsai. They are the building blocks, the structure that holds the project together. They are also the main conveyors of factual information regarding the magazine and such material aspects as payments. Nevertheless self-referential texts are also very much metafictional, in them the editors appear in their nicknames “El Jorge” and “Cayota” for Casciari and “Chiri” for Basilis. These nicknames offer a hint at a different level of reality, a narrative distancing especially when Casciari narrates Basilis as a character and vice versa. It is also an appeal for familiarity between the editors and the readers who partake, very often, also with a nickname in texts with a comment section enabled.
Figure 15 Self-referential and non-self-referential genres.

Colored in purple self-referential texts make up a large proportion of the total number of pieces published by *Orsai*.
Figure 16 Percentual distribution of self-referential genres.

Close to 40% of all *Orsai* content is devoted to *Orsai* itself.

Highly persuasive, self-referential texts are also in charge of embellishing the process of editing the print magazine. Most importantly, however, the narrative conveyed in these texts acts as both an account of the process and as the unfolding of the process *itself*. The fact that the story of *Orsai* does not just deal with past events, but proposes new forward-looking episodes that will unfurl in the future narratively as well as actually – the bar episode being the biggest example – is a literalization of the narrative as composition, not only textual, but also physical. Unable to witness all the aspects of the actual creation of the project, the narrative grants readers an almost immediate access to the development of each episode, but gives the illusion of transparency that makes readers feel part of the creation and development of the project. To be fair, the immediacy of the networked digital media in the blogs does speed the delivery of the narrative as closely as possible to being live, but it is the narrative craftiness of the editors and the presence of the story in all of the project’s media that create an effect of omniscience, an ‘all access pass’ for the readers. Even in its many different embodiments, omniscience – as Wayne C. Booth would have it – is the utmost position of complete privilege in narrative (160). The transparency of *Orsai*’s story offers readers a vantage point panorama that is both
reachable and prone to modification.

As mentioned before, among the self-referential texts there is much direct textual allusion, or linking in the electronic ones pointing the reader in the direction of other Orsai embodiments, reproductions or materialities. In many ways, the narrative cohesion is achieved by a collapse of different media all gathered to present every aspect of Orsai, to build its universe. As proposed by Jenkins in *Convergence Culture*, narrative in media convergence is the art of world making. Casciari and Basilis have indeed created a world – the global narrative – where rather capricious decisions regarding distribution and flexible publication dates, for example, are not only tolerated but made a proud part of the rules governing the existence of the project outside of the mainstream publishing industry. Inhabited by editors, authors, and readers, *Orsai* has been from the beginning successful in creating a space for exchange around narrative. Not long before N1 was launched, Casciari reflected upon this:

[A los lectores] les importa un carajo la revista (si ni siquiera hemos hablado todavía de contenidos). Esa gente pide a gritos encontrarse en alguna parte para leer. Para verse las caras y hablar de un tema en común. (“A caballo”)

[Readers] don’t give a damn about the magazine (we haven’t even talked about contents). These people are demanding to meet somewhere in order to read. To see their faces and talk about a common subject.

The global narrative of *Orsai* is the occasion holding together a community formed around it and it is also the common space in which they can interact and engage in exchange. This is the kind of narrative engagement fostered by interstories: an actualized metafiction.

To conclude this chapter I wish to come back to the issue of metafiction in light of the proposed narrative trend, interstory. Because of its formal networked configuration an interstory necessarily fosters intertextuality within a global narrative and, most importantly, self-referentiality. Structurally, interstories must lay out their building blocks in order to establish the connections that keep the narrative together. The outcome of this, in turn, evidences the artfulness of the narrative construction in the same way that
metafiction exhibits the seams holding its fabric together. Nevertheless, in interstories like *Orsai* the illusion of fiction is not at stake because the narrative has always had a very obvious real life grounding. The metafiction built by an interstory starts out from the fact that the narrative is both a fictionalized story and a real story. The new fictional contract in this context, if there was ever one, is about granting readers the opportunity to partake in the story, not of staying out of it, not of being protected from whatever may take place in it.

By making the narrative of *Orsai* as transparent as they have, Casciari and Basilis have managed to create not only the illusion of participation, but as we have seen several actual ways in which readers engage with the story as the development of the project, as well as constructed an intermedial and convergent space where readers can be immersed and interact virtually. Virtuality is not just a function of digital media or sophisticated computer simulated worlds, but a component of narrative comprehension. Virtuality, then, constitutes a creative process that involves a mental departure from the here-and-now, a fluid place of negotiation set aside from the actual and leading up to multiple filtrations between narrated world and actual world. Virtuality can thus be seen as the locus where metarepresentation takes place, i.e. where we negotiate the source of incoming narrative information and organize it accordingly. *Orsai* is not subject to the kind of categorization based on binaries such as fictional and real, but proposes a continuum of different levels of actual events, narrated events and fictional ones.

The prominence of readers in the making of *Orsai* both as an actual project and as a narrative has been discussed up to a certain extent. Chapter 4, however, focuses on the particulars of their participation. Dynamics of interaction between readers and authors/editors as well as among readers are looked at in detail. A closer examination of episodes in which readers have shown the highest and lowest levels of response is also explored thoroughly in order to theorize what is most and least attractive in the narrative. What readers talk about in their comments provides a well of information regarding the development of *Orsai* from a blog into a much larger project. Ultimately as I argue in the following pages, *Orsai* is explored as a cultural object facilitating community formation and fostering a sense of prosociality that might be behind the success of the project.
Chapter 4

4 On Readers

Interstory depends heavily on the participation of the readers. The global narrative’s network structure depends on textual and digital relations that require readers to follow the links uniting its media fragments. It has also been established that the network structure in interstory and the many devices or objects needed to access distinct fragments mean that readers are surrounded by similar, though different instances of a single story. Features in each particular medium determine how readers engage with the whole narrative. Up to know, however, I have dealt with the involvement of readers as collaborators in the materialization of Orsai: buying the print magazine, becoming authors published in the magazine and rerouting the projects’ direction when they disagree with the editors. There is, however, one aspect that remains unexplored: what goes on on the side of readers in an interstory? What draws and keeps their attention on a project like Orsai? And, most challenging of all, how can we study their involvement? In this chapter, I focus on the readers’ input into Orsai’s media ecology, namely the comments they have eagerly left on any of the main texts. Because acts of reading are practically impossible to track and study, the source of this chapter’s insights are the comments made by readers on the three Orsai blogs and the Web magazine, all located at editorialorsai.com. Hence, a reader in this chapter is considered not someone who reads, but someone who comments on Orsai.

Even when enormous amounts of user generated content is published online on a daily basis, activity in online communities is not easily achieved. Out of the total of audience members interested in an online community only a very small portion expresses their involvement, most commonly in the form of comments, while the rest remain unreachable. Although, this is surely the case in Orsai as well, the amount of readers who have participated on any of the blogs in the twenty-eight month period under revision in this thesis reaches an astonishing 6,833. The exploration of the readers’ comments might
not be a direct look into their reading habits or preferences, but, I argue, it does provide an understanding into what has sparked readers’ attention as indicated by their vocal activity. That digital publishing platforms have flattened the relationship between authors and readers is a widely discussed subject replicated in Orsai as well. However, how those interactions take place had not been discerned piece-by-piece combining theories as well as large amounts of data like I set out to do here. Drawing from studies on online communities and computer mediated communication I elaborate specific insights relating to the readers behavior vis-à-vis the different media which differ even among very similar media as the three blogs, as well as among the diverse types of contents contained in the whole of Orsai.

Overall this chapter also proposes a methodology for studying flesh and blood readers, as opposed to abstract entities implied in the text. Three types of analyses have been done using Orsai’s readers data set along the timeline of the project’s narrative: 1) comment input to look for episodes awakening higher interest; 2) targeted content analysis of word frequency and distribution to search for thematic patterns; and 3) network analysis to continue the analysis done on text genre as adopted by readers. It becomes clear along the chapter that each type of analysis sought to explore a deeper level of the topics that have constituted the uniting threads in this thesis: sociality of narrative, interactivity, self-consciousness and metafictionality, the cohesive effect of media convergence narratives, and metarepresentation as the creation of a narrative space spilling out of pages and screens.

4.1 Methodology

Following the methodology presented in Chapter 3, for this section of the research, readers have been included in the graph database, as have their comments. In contrast ‘medium’ is now a property of ‘piece’ to avoid, as much as possible, the emergence of giant elements in the network. Data on readers and comments, as a matter of fact, constitute the large majority of the database nodes. From the general schema presented before as well as the readers’ subset schema, it can be seen that in the graph database a
reader is defined not as someone who reads a text, but someone who comments on a text. Because of theoretical and methodological limitations implied in the study of the act of reading, access to individual readings is still not an easy task to handle. Thus, the catalogue of readers has been constituted over the basis of their activities in the blog. For this subset of the database I have Hernán Casciari to thank for providing the bulk data that was later cleaned, sorted and categorized to carry out the analyses presented in the following pages. The subset comprises all of the comments done in all of the blog posts, including the three blogs and the web magazine, in the twenty-eight month period from September 23rd, 2010 to January 15th, 2013. In rough total numbers, there are more 6,500 readers who have left over 41,000 comments. In this dataset, much larger and diverse than the one previously explored, I have been able to identify a high level of prosociality in the online community, as well as indicators of narrative self-consciousness on the readers’ exchanges. Insights into readers’ content and platform preferences signal particularities about the project’s yearly cycles, but can also be extrapolated as expectations arising out of a medium’s associated practices in our current media ecology.

The structure of the graph database is aimed at reflecting the community practices going on in Orsai. Its abstract modeling has been done over the basis of two figures: author and reader, joined together by their interaction through a text: article, short story, blog post, interview, etc. (Fig. 17).

The choice of these two theoretical notions has the purpose of maintaining the literary aspects of Orsai at the forefront of the discussion. An author – as is the case of Casciari himself – is in the interstory media ecology a blogger as well as a more conventional authorial figure as reporter, poet, chronicler, etc. Readers are also thought of as those moved by the interest in the development of a narrative, even though the practices associated with the narrative surpass just reading and include, for instance, buying the magazine, commenting on any of the interactive media, going to the bar, etc. I now turn

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6 Religious prosociality has been proposed by Suárez et al as a community’s ability to “self organize under... adverse conditions and... stress in order to foster a much needed intergroup stability and guarantee the survival of the larger community.” (Suárez, “Potosí,” 26)
to my brief elaboration of the figures of the author and the reader at play in this study. Although an extensive discussion of the corpus of the long tradition of theorizations on these two figures is far beyond the scope of this thesis, the following section sets the ground for the consideration of readers as distinct from authors in *Orsai*’s media ecology.

![Diagram of Author, Piece, Reader, and Comment](image)

*Figure 17 Abstract model used to analyze the readers corpus of comments.*

### 4.2 The Author and The Reader in *Orsai*

Doubtless, the figures of author and reader have most evidently eluded a clear-cut definition in literary theory especially since Roland Barthes famously declared “The Death of the Author” and radically opposed it to the reader in 1968. Conventionally seen as a concrete figure, “a human person… reign[ing] in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious
to unite their person and their work” (143), the author was a live person, creator of a written work and responsible for it, for its ultimate meaning, and many times even equated with his written production. Poststructuralist theorists put into question this figure and gave supremacy to language and the moment of enunciation uprooted from the predicate of the author’s existence, “the author when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after…. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text” (Barthes 145). Barthes thus takes away the authority of the author as the creator – and the key – to a text’s meaning, but leaves the issue of the act of writing, of physical production of a work unresolved. At the same time, in the closing of his article, Barthes elaborates an almost omnipotent figure of the reader that “holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (148). The assumption that seems to lie behind Barthes’ argument is an irreconcilable opposition between writer and reader, a vertical relationship that was in need of a turn around.

For Foucault, writing a year later in 1969, the problem of writing a work was left unresolved in the symbolic killing of the author. Barthes grants the supremacy of the author to the reader, but this position still assumes that one figure could have the key to a text’s meaning. Foucault surveys the history of the construction of the figure of the author locating it as a social, economical, critical, and even religious, construct. Over that basis, he proposes the coupling of a work with an author as a function — the author function — that rests on the proper name. Foucault writes:

> It would seem that the author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture. It has no legal status, nor is it located in the fiction of the work; rather, it is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being. (211)

Authorial figures in Orsai have kept some of the mystique Barthes sought to eliminate. Names and signatures are commonly displayed in both print and digital instances of the
project (Fig. 18). In fact, the project was born out of Casciari’s and Basilis’ wish to grant writers ample space for their writing without the pressures of advertisements and editorial censorship. This highlights the prominence given to authorial figures in the project both as creators and ‘personalities’ worth the attention of readers.

![Authors’ signatures](image)

**Figure 18 Authors’ signatures.**

An illustration from “Póngale la firma” a *goteo* piece published shortly before the launch of N6 in January 2012. Courtesy of Hernán Casciari.

‘Name-dropping’ practices are not uncommon in Orsai’s self-referential genres. As a matter of fact, within the subset of self-referential texts aimed at keeping the readers’ attention in the project, there is one particular genre termed *Autores*, authors. In these texts, authors are profiled and their inclusion in the project is much celebrated. The celebrity status of authors has too been observed in other literary online communities (Gruzd par. 22). For Anatolyi Gruzd, the figure of the author continues to incite much audience participation (par. 38). This particular aspect gains much relevance below when I discuss the authorial presence of Hernán Casciari in the blog comments.

This notwithstanding, readers have also been granted an unmistakable importance in the project. The figure of the reader has too received a lot of theoretical attention, and has
probably remained a more elusive concept. It has been since the 1970’s, with the advent of Reader Response Theory and criticism, that the reader has gained prominence in literary studies. Since then, the reader has not been seen as a passive, consuming audience upon which a text exerts its influence (political, ethical, etc.), but an active decoder of the text. Thinkers like Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss and, more radically, Barthes himself, turned to the ways in which texts are actualized, or concretized by readers based on what they termed “horizon of expectations”. Not only was this an attempt to stop the tendency of studies focused on authorial figures, it also constituted a slight attention shift from the study of the immanent qualities of a text proposed by New Criticism, and widely adopted in the first half of the twentieth century. The shift was not as radical as it might have seemed at first as the figure of the reader was in most cases (Iser’s “implied reader”, Sartre’s “ideal reader”, Rifaterre’s “superreader”, Eco’s “model reader” and Genette’s “narratee”) still theorized as an abstract entity inscribed in the text and even a function of the narrative text.

It would seem that the very difficulties of theorizing the figure of the reader in abstract terms have made it even more complicated to theorize about what flesh and blood readers do. As Manguel argues in *The Library at Night*, the act of reading does not leave traces that can later be studied, except as markings in the form of marginalia, and other activities associated with reading like correspondence about certain books (17). It has been until the turn of the twenty-first century that new understandings coming out of cognitive psychology and neuroscience that we can begin to make out the inner workings of reading and of narrative and fictional involvement. These advances have brought real readers back into the discussion of literature. I want to trace back to the concept of metarepresentation in the context of literary studies. Metarepresentation, along with theory of mind, has been used to describe, as well as explore, the ways in which readers track the sources of information (narrator, characters and their reliability); ‘read minds’ i.e. interpret pretty much automatically what state of mind is implied by narrative action; and more broadly navigate the porous boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Similarly, the data affordances granted by new reading digital platforms (number of downloads, Amazon’s kindle underlining feature, Twitter hashtags, blog commenting,
etc.) have also opened up paths of analysis into the practices of real readers. Then again, the characterization of reader surpasses the sole act of reading as decoding written signs. Individual and cultural practices associated with digital media have also shed light on the different kinds of reader engagement in print medium and print reading conventions, complicating our notions of what reading and reader are.

Gerald Prince has done a superb survey of the development of the figure of the reader in The Living Handbook of Narratology. One of its strengths is the actualization Prince manages to do to classical narratology concepts in light of cognitive and computational narratology. Establishing links between the diverse branches of the field allows him, and us along with him, to observe that initial intuitions prefigure later developments and findings. One of the points he makes that is most relevant to this work is how Iser’s “gaps in the text”, and Eco’s “possible worlds” notions foreshadowed the idea, later developed by Ryan, of the virtuality of narration. As I have been elaborating throughout this work, this virtuality of narration is constituted by a mental departure from the here-and-now, the construction of a creative space of negotiation between distinct, though adjacent, levels of representation and reality – where metarepresentation itself – takes place. The virtuality of narration is, thus the process of space creation where we negotiate the source of incoming narrative information, organize it accordingly, and partake of it. This virtuality, although in no way dependent on digital media is, however, heightened by forms of interactivity allowed by specific digital media. For Harrington, “communities on the Internet [are] a “virtual third place” for bonding local relationships and bridging global ties (10-11). The two directional move is especially interesting in the context of Orsai because of the local dimension grounded by the physical location of the bar, and the worldwide dimension achieved mostly by the digital platforms and reinforced by the distribution of the print magazine. This virtual third place is further augmented by the immersive qualities of convergent media platforms used in the narrative of Orsai. I will come back to this.

Thus, if Prince launches an introductory definition of reader as “a decoder, decipherer, interpreter of written (narrative) texts or, more generally, of any text in the broad sense of signifying matter” (“Reader,” par. 1), when adding the notion of virtuality and
metarepresentation, aided by media convergence as pointers of interactivity, the reader becomes a much more complex figure. Similarly as narratives cease to be composed only of text, our notion of reading also needs to be actualized. Reading then is carried out in different media on all three levels of the concept (semiotic phenomenon, channel of communication, and individual/cultural practices). In the particular narrative of Orsai, reading also means being part of the project. Similar methodological difficulties as those seen in Reader Response Theory have existed in the study of Orsai’s readers. In many ways particular acts of reading remain a territory yet to be explored. Others, like who is buying the magazine, who is reading the blog posts, who is downloading the PDF, kindle and iPad versions, together with other large amounts of data, are accessible only to those responsible for the project, namely Casciari and Basilis. For scholars looking into the project, like myself, only certain aspects of the data, those published publicly or those granted by the editors themselves, are available. Still the information obtained in this manner has sufficed to encounter rather insightful discoveries.

Practices associated with media convergence that have had an effect on narrative, like online identity formation, have made it possible to approach the study of readers as actual entities, and even as flesh and blood readers who, in the case of Orsai, have gone through the process of creating an account and, even when using an alias or a nickname, comment and take part in the project’s discussions. Those commenting on the blog are the ‘readers’ that have been included in the database. This, however, presupposes leaving aside many other readers who do not comment. As can be seen from the criterion used to define reader in the graph database, the notion is far from a passive consumer, and it is also quite different from a reader who reads only text. A reader is also someone who writes.

The distinction in the abstract model implemented in the graph database is thus based on what authors do and what readers do in Orsai’s media ecology. An author writes a main text in any of the five media contemplated in the database. A reader comments on the main texts published in all the media except for the print magazine. ‘Main texts’ are all those contemplated in the subset discussed in Chapter 3 and are only termed that to distinguish them from ‘comments’, which are also texts. Although initially the categories of author and reader seem mutually exclusive in the abstract modeling of the graph
database, in reality, within the sphere of interaction allowed by the networked global narrative of *Orsai*, there are many overlaps between authors and readers, and the same actual person might be, at times, playing both roles. Thus, Hernán Casciari, Christian Basilis and other blogging staff members appear both as authors and as readers. In the special cases in which readers have crossed over to become authors of the magazine, and the rare instances when authors join the forum of their texts, this dual presence also takes place. The border between author and reader in *Orsai* is porous because of the actual affordances of digital media and activities associated with each figure, and not because of theoretical reasons. The meeting point between authors and readers, as well as readers and readers, are main texts. The centrality of main texts reinforces the argument I have already put forward and continue to elaborate in the following pages that *Orsai*’s community is held together by the cohesion of its narrative fragments, much more than it is by other reasons. Exchange is both caused and mediated by the project’s narrative.

4.3 Online/Offline Narrated Identities and Interaction

Still related to the author and reader figures, the notion of digital identity oscillates between online and offline contexts, and that has had an impact on how we think of the person writing at the other end of the broadband as well as those reading. On the one hand there is a pretty straightforward line between Foucault’s author function as the name under a main text published in digital formats and the actual person. On the other hand, as it has been mentioned, pseudonyms –and in the case of Casciari and Basilis: nicknames– have established a certain degree of narrative distancing, which nonetheless still refer back to the flesh and blood editors. An illustrative example of this occurred precisely when *Orsai* was about to launch its most physical, face-to-face manifestation – just before the opening of OrsaiBar:

Mañana a la nochecita va a pasar algo increíble en el Bar Orsai: Tonga (el gran distribuidor) y Chiri (el jefe de redacción de *Orsai*) van a conocerse en persona. En un punto esto me angustia, porque yo hubiera preferido que Tonga siga convencido que Chiri es un personaje. Todavía lo cree. Pero mañana descubrirá que no. (“Verse las caras”)
Tomorrow evening something amazing is happening in Bar Orsai: Tonga (the great distributor) and Chiri (Orsai’s editor in chief) are going to meet in person. On some level this worries me, because I’d rather have Tonga go on believing that Chiri is a character. He still does. But tomorrow he’s going to find out he is not.

There is a clear consciousness of how the collaborators of the project have been constructed narratively, that it even seems, although jokingly, necessary to make it patent that they are not. This particular instance manifests the unfolding of author and editor identities, one corresponding to the flesh and blood person, the other discursively constructed. Nevertheless, the narrative illusion in regards to the project’s actors is not sustained for long and, indeed, it would seem that the knowability of the collaborator’s provides an ethical stance to Orsai, i.e. that there is somebody taking charge, and care, of it. As a matter of fact, many kinds of online interaction favoring the community cohesion in Orsai might be attributed to the paralleling of actual person and onscreen name/persona/nickname.

As seen before, all narratives have a degree of interactivity that might be enhanced or obscured by a particular medium’s affordances. The idea that digital narratives are further characterized by interactivity is based on the affordances granted by computer mediated communication and has its history in hypertext fiction – the ‘original’ interactive fiction. Likewise, the notion of interactivity has been widely associated with the empowerment of the reader, in a Barthesian fashion. And as a matter of fact, the initial theoretical push on hypertext fiction characterized it as a concretization of Poststructuralist premises. Not only was the meaning of a narrative the domain of the reader but also its structure. As George Landow would have it:

"today when we consider reading and writing, we probably think of them as serial processes or procedures carried out intermittently by the same person: first one reads, then one writes, and then one reads some more. Hypertext, which creates an active, even intrusive reader, carries this convergence of activities one step closer to completion; but in so doing, it infringes upon the power of the writer, removing some of it and granting it to the reader. (125)

The limitations of interactivity granted by the first examples of hypertext fiction have been already the subject of much discussion, Miall’s and Dobson’s “Reading Hypertext
and the Experience of Literature” being one of the harshest. In their take, hypertext is basically unequipped to produce the same kind of immersive experience than reading print literature does, “as a vehicle for the experience of literary reading itself, hypertext appears to promote processes of attention that inhibit the engagement and absorption that are its most characteristic aspects” (4). Miall’s and Dobson’s view, I believe, is too overgeneralizing of what the possibilities and limitations of all hypertexts might be, but I agree with them in that hypertext is not conductive of all kinds of narrative interactivity. The readers’ freedom to construct their own narratives granted by hypertext structure has been seen as only partial, and in fact readers have only the capacity of “choosing from among multiple rails laid down by the author” (Greenspan par. 16). While an all powerful hypertext fiction might still be considered as the ‘ultimate’ example of interactivity in narrative, affecting its very discourse, I would like to propose that interactivity in the context of media convergence and interstory operates differently on each of the three layers characterizing the concept of medium, and as a form of both textual and extra textual reader engagement. In that sense the question I want to ask is who is interacting with whom/what? Is it individuals, is it individuals and machines, is it individuals through machines?

For Marie-Laure Ryan the prototypical form of interactivity is constituted by “communication between intelligent agents” and thus an interactive system should “involv[e] not only choice…but also a two-sided effort that creates a feedback loop” (“Onion,” 35). In the three layer definition of medium, interactivity would then work at each of the three levels: on the semiotic layer as a cognitive/phenomenological process of metarepresentation of the narrated world; on the layer of channel of communication as the combinatorial possibilities granted by the platforms in which the story is constructed (textual input, navigation of hyperlinks, etc.); and on the layer of individual and social practices as the actualization of a narrative in the real world – though not necessarily in a physical way – and shared by real readers. Within each level, the development of the narrative might to a certain extent be altered or modified. This proposition is supported by Ryan’s own catalogue of digital texts’ interactivity that she explains through the metaphor of a textual onion:
In the outer layers, interactivity concerns the presentation of the story, and the story exists prior to the running of the software; in the middle layers, interactivity concerns the user’s personal involvement in the story, but the plot is still predetermined; in the inner layers, the story is created dynamically through the interactions between the user and the system. (“Onion,” 37)

In the same article, Ryan is wary to propose the feasibility of the innermost kinds of interactivity running out of computer programs, whereby the challenge is not really technological, but logical and aesthetic (48). However, in interstory, the possibilities of reader-reader interaction around the different media platforms might be conductive of all three levels of interactivity, even the innermost ones.

In interstories interactive exchanges are not necessarily constitutive of the narrative but are mediated by it. In narratives not exclusively published through a digital platform like interstories, all three levels of interactivity seem to apply. The possibilities of diverse kinds of interactive exchange between authors and readers multiply given that different platforms provide interactive capacities proper to each of them. In interstories, and other texts sharing some of their characteristics like “multimodal novels”, the shifts from one medium to others, “impl[ies] that the reader has to engage in intertextual and intermedial ways of meaning-making [and] to a certain extent, the reader's activities start to resemble those of the user of an electronic hypertext” (Hallet 150). Even though there might be obvious differences between face-to-face, blog comment, and other kinds of interaction in an interstory, a development described by Ruth Page takes place: “the discursive context that emerges from participatory culture means the reader’s interaction with the text can now be considered as only one element in the process of storytelling in digital media” (“Interactivity,” 214 emphasis mine). Orsai, in particular, relies heavily on the interaction that goes on in all three blogs and the web magazine but other forms of interaction happen through the print magazine and, more evidently in the face-to-face context of the Bar.

As proposed in the definition of interstory, the networked narrative structure resembles hypertextual configurations. Perhaps much of that resemblance is an inheritance from the very medium of the blog. For Rettberg, blogs “use technologies first imagined by
visionaries of hypertext, but are more social than even these visionaries imagined" (56). When translated into narratives, the implication of the sociality of blogs is that the story leaves the page/screen and spills into the readers’ lives. How this happens is, perhaps, one of the most interesting aspects in the narrative of Orsai. I suggest that the different roles that readers fulfill, both on screen and in the reality of the general project, enhanced by the features of blog platforms, the practices associated with the print magazine, and those of other media, are the channel through which Orsai traverses from page and screen to the readers’ life. Instances of this have already been touched upon. The textual input of the readers, however, is still to be explored as it enriches the narrative, pushes it forward and leaves traces of different kinds of acts of reading.

The analysis of reader data sheds light on the different roles that readers have taken in the project. Likewise, a look at general dynamics and patterns provides an interesting model for the study of community formation around the narrative and the actualization of story. The global narrative does not become an autonomous reality, but a space does seem to emerge out of the interactions propitiated by the story, whether it has a physical correlate is accessory to its implications. The emerging space of the global narrative is in any case a readers’ space of dialogue – literally as in the blog comments section, and has been adopted as part of readers’ lives. The spilling of the story into its readers’ life, I sustain, is becoming a recurrent characteristic of our many convergent and intermedial narratives, one that signals not only the metareferential turn of contemporary artistic production as Werner Wolf would have it, but – perhaps more importantly – of the audiences metafictional engagement.

The narrative of Orsai, its textual construction and, overall, the development of its materialities are a clear product of the processes unfolding in our current media ecology. At a time in which a lot of debate on what the future of the book and reading might look like, a narrative like Orsai and other similar ones appeal to what Werner Wolf terms “the universality of narrative” (“Gap,” 91). This notion, replicated by both Bryan Boyd and Jonathan Gottschall in their storytelling studies, has at its core the human tendency not only to narrativize experience and look for stories anywhere there might be one, but also to share them. Consequently, it has found a fertile ground in the age of media
convergence where there is a huge proliferation of textual, visual, aural, and other kinds of input in all possible media, devices and environments actual as well as virtual. This, which Tim Carmody has called the age of hyperliteracy can be complemented, I propose, with a narrative twist, and further characterize it as an age of hypernarrativity. Forms of narrative ordering (causality, sequentiality, counterfactuality, etc.) might be seen as the means through which we are being able to make sense of all the information – not just textual – available to us. As a result, many diverse narrative endeavors, not just those with a literary aim, have appeared. In the midst of the digital revolution we might not know what books, both print and digital, are going to look like in the future. Similarly, literary paradigms are being reformulated at an unprecedented pace and genres are being both reinvented and contested. But I do believe that the current media ecology itself is being conductive of narrative production and has all the social elements already in place to grant projects a successful outcome as it has happened with Orsai.

What we can see is the landscape of a revolution according to Clay Shirky. Writing about the demise of the newspaper industry, Shirky states: “old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place” (“Newspapers,” 28). Not being able to predict what will become a new book, reading or literary paradigms, discontinued, fragmentary yet cohesive narratives like Orsai become snapshots of the period during which they were under development. “What will work in its place?” – asks Shirky – “Nothing will work, but everything might. Now is the time for experiments, lots and lots of experiments, each of which will seem as minor at launch as… Wikipedia did, as octavo volumes did” (“Newspapers,” 29).

4.4 Orsai in the Context of Blogs

Blogs are a platform in which a lot of literary experimentation has been done. The history of blogs goes back to the early 1990’s, and for its first ten years of existence, blogging was a relatively rare activity. It was not until the “one button publishing” heralded by Blogger that the new medium really exploded. In 2002 there were 200,000 Blogger users, which in only one year quintupled. When Technoratti published its first “State of the
Blogosphere” in 2004, the report included four million blogs all around the Internet (Part 1). Only three years later, there were 70 million blogs, observing an impressive tendency that the blogosphere was doubling in size every six months (“Blogosphere 2007,” Part 1). Presently, WordPress hosts about 40% of the blogs in the world at over 66 million in which 41.5 million new posts as published and 53.2 million new comments are made on a monthly basis (WordPressStats). The development of blog platforms has been so astonishing that it is hard not to look at them as a mine of information for studies from all disciplines as well as a phenomenon in itself. A radical change blogs have brought about is, as Bonnie Nardi explains, that "readers can create blogs as much as writers" (“Social Activity,” 225).

The rise of blogging has touched many different writing publishing industries, journalism being one that has felt it most deeply. Nonetheless, literary publishing has also been touched by it. Varied narrative manifestations have taken place on blogs: fan fiction sites, personal-fictional diaries, blognovels, etc. Much of the focus on the impact of blogs upon publishing has been put on the economic change of paradigm in publishing, as well as on the fact that "the blog is in essence, a form of socialized writing” (Cleger 70 translation mine). For Clay Shirky “[blogs] are such an efficient tool for distributing the written word that they make publishing a financially worthless activity.” (“Weblogs,” par. 1).

New distribution models of print and electronic books have tried to remedy this by adding layers of security, copyrights and proprietary formats with little success. For Shirky, there are two intrinsic values of traditional publishing: upfront costs and scale of distribution. There needs to be a support system for the production of each copy of a book and a network that distributes it and ensures the upfront costs are recovered. These values have not been, for the most part, eliminated in digital publishing. But they have in one-button publishing, which still has to match the extrinsic value of traditional publishing: the prestige, and indicators of quality, associated with the process of publishing granted by the economic investment supporting it. According to Shirky, in blogs this value comes after – not before – publication. Weblogs, immersed in a sea of blogs, can easily be ignored if they do not offer something of value to their readers. The filtering, as a result, comes from the readers — an instance of Piérre Lévy’s collective
intelligence.

The details of copyright laws and the values associated with various modes of publishing in the digital age far exceed the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that, in the new media ecology alternative ways of publishing have made their way and along with them new ways of journalistic and literary composition. The distribution and payment systems in Orsai are examples of this. Because of the multimedia capacities that blogging platforms among others have progressively incorporated, narratives published on them have rather frequently also incorporated other media. Other media’s contributions to the overall narrative have had different meanings and compositional implications, such as print editions of the blog content. Nevertheless, the one feature of blogs that seems to have had the most impressive and consistent effect through diverse cases is the adoption of commenting tools enabling dialogue among readers and allowing for different levels of audience participation.

Energetically moving away from conventional publishing, Orsai has made every content piece of the project available for free online, through several platforms. Exclusive contents are not based on payment – as in the case of the print magazine – but on level of involvement, for example, a small group of posts available only to distributors. Most importantly, however, the move away from conventional publishing granted Orsai the possibility to experiment in different media and platforms. Videos published on vimeo.com have been part of the narrative of the project too (Fig. 19), as has been Casciari’s own TedX talk posted on the homepage at editorialorsai.com.

As argued before, Orsai’s passage along media platforms as well as diverse semiotic media grant cohesiveness to the project both narratively and actually. The center of the project’s interaction with readers continues to be through the blogs. Originally one and later divided, the three Orsai blogs are the meeting place where authors and readers can engage in exchange and dialogue.
The first thing that has to be said about participation in social media, and more specifically in blogs, is that it has been proved to be rather unequal and ruled by power laws, a function of the social dynamics at play within them. Conventionally illustrated with a long tail curve,

we know that power law distributions tend to arise in social systems where many people express their preferences among many options. We also know that as the number of options rise, the curve becomes more extreme. This is a counter-intuitive finding - most of us would expect a rising number of choices to flatten the curve, but in fact, increasing the size of the system increases the gap between the #1 spot and the median spot….A second counter-intuitive aspect of power laws is that most elements in a power law system are below average, because the curve is so heavily weighted towards the top performers. (Shirky “Power Law,” par. 8)
In Orsai, where readers have several narrative information input sources, the same long tail curve is observed in regards to the media richer in reader interaction. (Fig. 20).

![Graph showing total comments in all four media analyzed.](image)

**Figure 20 Total comments in all four media analyzed.**

In the period under revision, the original OrsaiBlog has received the most comments in total, close to 30,000 indicating a stronger reader preference to comment on that medium. Nonetheless, it is also the medium that has existed the longest.

It is not surprising the original OrsaiBlog remains by far the most preferred medium among readers. A view of the comments published in OrsaiBlog (Fig. 21) shows that even though there is a strong preference for this medium, there have been very clear peaks of reader engagement at the beginning of the project – when the print magazine was coming into being, and then with each new issue in the first year, and moments of evident disinterestedness towards the middle of 2011. There was a radical diminishing of post published in OrsaiBlog after the move to editorialorsai.com in April 2012 towards the end of the graph. Since then, OrsaiBlog became Casciari’s personal blog while
matters relating to the magazine were posted on Redacción. All of the visualizations of
the comments presented in this chapter follow a similar long tail pattern with only slight
changes depending on the particularities of each analysis. A strong preference for
OrsaiBlog content throughout the 28-month period, and a massive amount of reader
interest at the beginning of the project have marked all of the results. Simply put, this
means that much of what can be said about the readers’ comments emerges out of those
two highlights.

![Figure 21 Totals of comments published in OrsaiBlog (2010-2012)](image)

However, when slicing the data from OrsaiBlog into specific dates, it is quite telling to
see a trend showing readers’ migration to Redacción. Initially, Redacción was for the
most part ignored, but as it became the venue for more frequent updates on the project’s
development, the amount of reader participation has escalated reaching rates close to
those observed in OrsaiBlog (Fig. 22 and Fig. 23). The readers’ activity move to
Redacción is an unmistakable sign that they are highly attracted to Orsai because of the
project’s own development. Updates about new magazines, and new additions to the
media ecology of Orsai seem to be the most attractive contents for readers, at least as it
can be judged from the rates of comments.
Figure 22 Total comments in OrsaiBlog in 2012.

After Redacción came into being there have been fewer posts in OrsaiBlog and thus the total rate of comments had decreased.

Figure 23 Total comments in Redacción since it opened in 2012.

While it took a while for Redacción to gain its readership, the pattern of activity has come to resemble that of OrsaiBlog.

In contrast, OrsaiBar blog (Fig. 24) and the WebMagazine have amassed a similar amount of comments and come short on reader participation when compared to the other two media. The pattern observed in the total comments received by OrsaiBar blog is even more interesting as the higher levels of participation correspond to the projection of the bar, before it was even a concrete instance. Those posts too were published, originally in
OrsaiBlog and later migrated to OrsaiBar blog in 2012. The radical diminishing in reader participation in OrsaiBar blog exactly right after the bar opened its doors could be theorized as an excision between the face-to-face environment and its digital correlate. In other words, once the bar was in place, offering its own kind of reader interaction, the virtual environment was no longer as attractive.

![Figure 24 Total comments in OrsaiBar blog.](image)

**Initial levels of participation, during the projection of the bar were very high in comparison to the participation seen once the bar started to operate.**

It is evident that, although the bar constitutes the main avenue of face-to-face interaction in the project, its digital correlate does not carry much weight. The need for a real world component in order to ensure the sustainability of online communities has been established for quite some time now (Shapiro 116). However, while OrsaiBar is the most literal manifestation of Orsai’s community, it would seem that its area of influence remains in the physical world and is not brought back to the online one. It could even be theorized that the community in regards to the bar has been divided by the off-line component not available to everybody, thus explaining the decreased levels of participation in the online section of the bar. Not only does the physical location of the bar, Buenos Aires, limit the amount of readers able to partake in the dialogue, but also the
discussion that might arise from the bar can alienate those in other geographical locations. This constitutes a radical difference from the worldwide scope of Orsai and Redacción blogs.

Most intriguing, however, are the equally low rates of reader participation in the web magazine (Fig. 25). Also following a long tail pattern, it is clear that readers have opted out of this commenting avenue, which was very popular only during the first three issues.

![Figure 25 Total comments in the web magazine.](image)

There has been a radical decline in readers’ interest to comment on the magazine’s articles after N3.

It can be speculated that the decline of online discussion of the magazine is caused by one, or a combination of three factors: 1) Consideration of the texts not related to the project remain embedded in a conventional, print-culture, individual and private reading practice; 2) Discussion of the texts takes place in smaller face-to-face communities like those formed during the early stages of the project apropos the ten pack distribution system; or 3) Readers have not experienced the same kind of exchange between them and the other authors – especially in comparison with Casciari’s own involvement – and have
for the most part deserted it. While the first two factors are arguable, I believe the last one might be having a bigger influence. After all, this reading community has become used to talking to the author and engaging with him in dialogue. Anything short of that might not be as satisfactory and thus abandoned.

The radical differences in reader participation in each of the online media could be taken a token of success versus failure in each one. Conversely, I suggest they be seen as an indicator that each medium is fulfilling their particular convergent functions. While Orsai and Redacción blogs are clearly successful at keeping readers’ interest alive, the more reduced, and allegedly local, involvement in OrsaiBar blog caters to a smaller demographic which nonetheless remains active. Finally, low rates of reader participation in the web magazine might be an indicator that the print magazine is, indeed, functioning as a slower, more leisurely medium, and targeting and fulfilling reading habits more in tune with its print medium that do not necessarily include commenting on the pieces.

What we can see from the different flows of participation in Orsai is also a diverse rhythm of publication and consumption. Magazines are published every 2-4 months, while blog entries are posted every few days. In this fashion, speedier publishing might be fostering a bigger sense of urgency to participate. As the development of the project has been gestated in the Orsai and Redacción blogs, readers seek to be there in the front line, anticipating and witnessing what might come next. From the previous visualizations, accounting only for totals it is not possible to know whether there is a parallel between the times of blog post publishing and comment posting. A different kind of ordering obeying the date of the last comment posted on each article or issue of the web magazine, as opposed to the date of the blog or magazine post has indeed shown that there are different commenting rhythms in the blogs and in the web magazine. See Figs. 26-29. The final date included in the readers’ comments database is January 15th, 2013.
The pattern of latest comments is almost identical to the one seen in the totals per entry.

Here again, there is a parallel pattern between total number of comments and rhythm of commenting.
The same drastic fall in comment is seen and keeps a consistent distribution between the total numbers and the dates of post and comment publication.

Figure 29 Latest comments published on each Web Magazine issue.

Though there have not been peaks of activity in time, all issues continued to be commented on in until January 2013. The distribution of totals comments and date of commenting varies radically, which can be theorized as a longer ‘life-span’ of magazine texts.
When compared to the absolute totals, the ‘life-span’ of a blog post – measured by the last comment posted on it – is pretty much parallel in visualizations of OrsaiBlog, Redacción and OrsaiBar blog showing an almost identical pattern between the total and the temporality of the comments. In the issues of the magazine, however, this is quite different. The long tail indicating reader preference for the first three issues is broken by the time in which these texts continue to be commented on. As a matter of fact all of the latest comments in the Web magazine were posted in January 2013. The preference for the first three issues is still clearly indicated, but the fact that these issues continue to spark reader activity over two years after their original publication date signals that their life is much longer than that of blog posts. While the constant updates in blogs spark much more participation in real time and are not retaken long past their publication date, the slower process of the magazine seems to be fostering a delayed response.

Likewise, another level of analysis shedding light on the readers’ practices on each media is ‘depth’ of participation as measured by number of words in each comment. The division into four categories: -20 word, -50 words, -150 words, and +150 words, is for the most part arbitrary but sought to account for patterns observed upon close reading. I resort to the comments left on “Algo para recordar” published in OrsaiBlog on September 26th, 2012 to exemplify each category, but the patterns can be examined throughout. Simply put, comments with fewer than twenty words tend to be posted immediately after the main text was posted and, as I explore below in detail, are characterized mostly by community games like “Pri”, and “Top ten”; and congratulatory and thanking remarks such as “Wow”, “Me encantó esta historia!”, “Una vez mas la realidad supera a la ficción. ¡Buenísimo!”, etc. This kind of comment is the most common in the entire corpus, and even though it does not bring in much discussion, it maintains the channel of communication open. Comments belonging to the two in-between categories (-50 words and -150 words) tend to follow in time and show many overlaps in content and focus. In these, readers usually comment on particular aspects of the blog entry as in these two examples:

La historia comienza con el peor momento en la vida de un hombre: tener que agarrar los clasificados para buscar trabajo. Y lo que es peor, para
simular delante de una mujer que somos responsables.

The story starts in the worst moment in the life of a man: having to go over the classifieds to look for a job. And what’s worse, to feign in front of a woman we are responsible for.

Es difícil no sentirse identificado, si alguna vez intentaste escribir algo imposible durante meses, sentado en el escritorio de tu casa. Gracias por esta historia, llena más de lo que te imaginás.

It is hard not to empathize if you ever tried to write something impossible for months, sitting at your desk at home. Thanks for this story, it’s more fulfilling than you can imagine.

Not that different in focus -150 word comments elaborate on the subjects already being discussed:

descubro "algo para recordar" aquí, pues a Orsai 8 apenas pude olerla y transportarla, se la presté a un amigo fanático del indio que estaba con una fisura importante… compartí la historia con mi viejaleyéndola en voz alta entre mates, ella no puede parar de reirse yo no puedo parar de llorar… algunas personas tocan la flauta, otras tocan la fibra, ¡gracias por tanto hernan! maldonado/Uruguay. (sic)

I found ‘Algo para recordar’ here, As soon as I could smell Orsai 8 and bring it home, I lent it to a friend who’s a fan of the indio and who had a broken bone… I shared the story with my mom, reading it aloud in between mates, she could not stop laughing and I could not stop crying… some people are amused by it, and others touched, thanks so much, hernan! maldonado/ Uruguay.

Comments longer than 150 words tend to be either ‘mock’ letters to Casciari, reflections on a controversial topic when the post touches upon it, or the readers’ own literary efforts. I include an example of each one in Fig. 30:
14/09/2012 a las 20:10

Hola Hernan, como siempre un texto genial! Como te conté alguna vez, empecé a conocerte gracias a Mujer Gorda, y desde entonces estoy enganchada con tus textos. Estoy releyendo tu blog desde el inicio, voy por el año 2005 con el de "Los españoles son de marte y los argentinos de venus" Y acabo de leer este último post, del 6 de sept 2012. Ya desde hace un tiempo he querido comentar que me llama mucho la atención que tus seguidores que comentaban en los post antiguos, ya no comentan ahora: interior, patomusa, la romu, clari, angelgris, etc. que pase que ya no veo sus comentarios? Un abrazo!

10/09/2012 a las 18:30

- ¿Te gustó esta entrada, Miche_l?, pregunta una chica muy, muy literaria.
- Sí, responde Miche_l.
- Hace tiempo que te gustaría colaborar para esta revista, verdad Miche_l?
- Sí.
- ¿Y por qué no les dejas algo a Orsai y a sus lectores aquí mismo, y ahora?
- ¿What?
- Aquí, invita a leer una historia tuya. Si Orsai o sus lectores, gustan de ella, quien sabe lo que ocurra.
- ¿Lo crees prudente?
- Lo creo muy muy literario.
- ¿En serio?
- ¿Sabes?, dudas mucho, pero yo, como soy sólo una chica muy, muy literaria, lo haré.
- Espera, nooooooooh.
- Callate, a veces como narrador literario... Amigos de Orsai. hace tiempo que Miche_l quiere asociarse a este juego. Así que les invita a leer una de sus entradas, para que ustedes mismos, lo hagan papilla, o lo sugieran como jugador de la liga Orsai. ¿Les tacla?
- ¿Pero qué haces?
- Calla Michilopotzi. Bueno amigos, he aquí una entrada muy, muy literaria.

Figure 30 Two examples of +150 word comments.

The first one makes up a ‘letter’ to Casciari, the second is a reader’s own creative output.
It is also worth noting that, even when in all four media, shorter comments are radically more common than longer ones, it is in the Web Magazine where comments over 150 words are more common. Once again, this signals a different rhythm and level of involvement with the texts published there in comparison with those published in the blogs. Another aspect that distinguishes the magazine from the other platforms is its availability on more diverse platforms aside from the print and the web versions. The response to the web magazine might not be as impressive as the interest awakened by the print version. Still, the already impressive number of print copies sold by the magazine are dwarfed when measured against its PDF counterpart accessible through the issuu.com website (Fig. 31).

![Figure 31 Percentage of print and PDF copies distributed.](image)

Even when N1 is still the best selling issue of the print magazine at just over 10,000 copies, the number of free downloads from issuu.com amount to over 85,000; close to the 90% of the total of copies of N1 distributed in both formats, print and PDF. This pattern is replicated with all the other issues.

This matter has been addressed by Casciari. His decision to launch, immediately after the
release of the print copies, a free full PDF version of the magazine has likely propitiated the growth of Orsai readership, although not necessarily a very vocal one. At the close of 2011, Casciari wrote,

\[
\text{Durante 2011 editamos cuatro revistas Orsai. Vendimos una media de siete mil ejemplares de cada una, y con ese dinero le pagamos (extremadamente bien) a todos los autores. Los .pdf gratuitos de esas cuatro ediciones alcanzaron las seiscientas mil descargas o visualizaciones en internet. ("Para ti, Lucía", emphasis mine)}
\]

During 2011 we edited four Orsai magazines. We sold an average of seven thousand copies of each one, and with that money we paid (extremely well) every author. Free .pdf files of those four issues reached six hundred thousand downloads or views online.

At the time of writing this thesis – May 2013 – the total number of PDF downloads from the issuu.com website for issues 1-10 amounts to 2,437,994 in comparison to the number of print copies for those same issues reaching 69,080. This, along with the rhythm and depth of comments poured into the web version, seems to indicate that the magazine is much more read (even when it is well known that downloads do not equate actual readings or impact) than it is being commented on.

Such different responses might also be an indication that although it would seem Orsai has provided the environment to turn each medium into a blog, or blog like publication, readers have not adopted them in the same way. OrsaiBar blog is rather irrelevant in terms of reader participation, which might not have a correlate with what might actually be going on in the physical location. The web magazine, also quite peripheral in editorialorsai.com might be having much more impact in other platforms (print, PDF, iPad, etc.). Following that, it is not only the platform that is encouraging active reader participation, but the content poured on that platform, the expectations it arises and the feedback it produces. Fig. 32 shows all the comments that have produced each of the blog and web magazine posts. This graph is, so to speak, a transversal cut across everything that has been published online by Orsai from September 2010 to January 2013. The temporal development of reader participation is the first thing that comes to mind in this visualization. The first half of the twenty eight months analyzed has been radically more active than the second half. Most important is the correlation between the peaks of
activity with the publication of each issue, N1 being by far the one showing the highest levels of participation. Other medial developments like the proposal of *Editorial Orsai* have sparked a peak in reader participation. A hypothesis presented in Chapter 3, that in the second year, due to the subscription model, much activity had decreased both on the part of the editors as well as the readers can be glimpsed at here as well.

**Figure 32** The complete distribution in time of reader comment activity.

Temporal differences in reader participation shows a significant decrease in activity with identifiable peaks corresponding to medial developments of *Orsai*: new issues, changes in the distribution system, etc. Lower periods of activity correspond for the most part to the web publication of the magazine.

A network visualization of the same phenomenon also shows a clear preference for those pieces dealing with the media developments in *Orsai* as expressed by a higher number of incoming comments (Fig. 33). There are a few main texts marked as non-self referential that are also noticeably targets of huge reader output, but, the majority of the larger nodes belong to the subset of self-referential ones.
Figure 33 The entire *Orsai* network.

Non-self-referential main texts have been colored green, while self-referential ones have been colored red. The bigger the nodes, the more comments they have received. This aerial view of the network shows that reader preference, as expressed by incoming comments, lies in the matters dealing with *Orsai* developments.

From the levels of participation in each of the blogs, and the clearly elevated participation around the times of the project’s media developments, it is evident that readers are mostly invested in *Orsai* related content. Along with the clearly different patterns of participation in Web Magazine and OrsaiBar blog, I take this as a confirmation of my earlier assertions on how narrative engagement is non-dependent on media, even though media features might enhance or obscure it.
Shirky sees the function of the long-form writing – print – publisher as “creating social capital [in the] long term” but acknowledges that its business model is “up in the air, and every possibility is going to be tried in the coming years; ad-supported books, sponsored books, serialization, user-underwriting and more” (“Mattering,” par. 10). *Orsai* seems, then, to propose a combination between the long, meticulous form of print publishing in the magazine, and the immediate, stimulating speed of blog publishing. Each of *Orsai*’s media is clearly catering to different reading practices and assumptions, and that is visible in the kind of activity they foster. On another level, within the patterns of participation, it is still possible to carry out more fine-grained analysis of what goes on in *Orsai*’s readers’ participation. Jakob Nielsen has characterized the standard measure for Web 2.0 environments. Nielsen has stated that there is a 90-9-1 rule in most online communities:

- 90% of users are lurkers (i.e., read or observe, but don't contribute).
- 9% of users contribute from time to time, but other priorities dominate their time.
- 1% of users participate a lot and account for most contributions: it can seem as if they don't have lives because they often post just minutes after whatever event they're commenting on occurs. (“Participation,” par. 4)

Even in what seem like very active online communities of participation, this rule according to Nielsen cannot be reverted and the acute differences in participation only get worse in blogs where the rule is 95-5-0.1, and even more when a further commitment is necessary, as is the case of charity and donation sites. An explanation for this is the effect some people’s choices have on others’. In *Orsai*, this tendency has been observed on both levels. First the pattern of reader engagement: a few readers account for most comments, while a lot of readers account for fewer comments. While this might present a problem of representativity in the data that can be obtained from every online community, it also points to a much larger sort of involvement. Assuming the same participation rule applies to *Orsai*, then the more than 6,500 readers (who comment) would constitute only about the 10% of the total audience the project has. The implication of this is that the narrative of *Orsai* would have gathered really large rates of readership, reaching perhaps over one hundred thousand silent readers.

Not having access to other metrics like page views, visit duration and unique/returning visitors, the only other measurement are the number of magazine downloads from the
issuu.com website presented above. Not only can they be signaling that the magazine is much more read than it is commented, it might also be an indication of the extended community in comparison to the number of readers active in the blog. These numbers are also an indicator of the tiny portion of readers sponsoring the project and keeping it financially sustainable. Nevertheless, even when the 90% of Orsai readership may not be making themselves present in either monetary or commentary forms, it can be theorized that they might be contributing to the project in different forms such as spreading the word about it to potential paying and commenting readers.

Shirky is quick to acknowledge that the power law he outlines does not provide insights into the reasons why some blogs might be more successful in creating communities around them.

Perhaps some writing is simply better than average (a preference for quality), perhaps people want the recommendations of others (a preference for marketing), perhaps there is value in reading the same blogs as your friends (a preference for "solidarity goods", things best enjoyed by a group). It could be all three, or some other effect entirely, and it could be different for different readers and different writers. What matters is that any tendency towards agreement in diverse and free systems, however small and for whatever reason, can create power law distributions. (“Power Law,” par. 13)

Studies on technology acceptance and social influence have used two models to explain why some online communities are more successful than others, measured most commonly by high levels of participation. Technology acceptance studies posit the notion of perceived usefulness as a reason why individuals would adopt a particular site. This postulate, however, can only account when there is a perceivable goal in joining an online community (Wang 784). In the case of Orsai, as well as in other literary and storytelling online communities, usefulness might not be part of the equation leading readers to become avid community members. Instead, the force driving users into a community like Orsai is narrative and fiction themselves. It is the desire to take part in a narrative and share it that prompts readers to engage in conversation among them and with the editors and authors as well. In this way, the virtual third space proposed by Harrington is not just virtual because it has a “home” in the blog’s digital environment, but also virtual as the global narrative of Orsai is a place of potential collective creation.
4.6 Reader Behavior and Prosociality

Not being an online community that brings a material benefit to its members, then, what are the dynamics at play in Orsai? How can Orsai be considered a community?

According to Howard Rheingold, "virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (5). High levels of interest and participation have already been established; it is also clear by now that it is the narrative of the project that sparks readers’ interest the most. Judging from these two facts, it is also evident that interactions in the blog are, as predicted by Shirky and Nielsen, governed by a power law. Nonetheless, aside from the distribution of participation, it is perhaps most important to observe the types of interactions featured in Orsai’s community.

As a matter of fact, in general, it is possible to characterize Orsai as a friendly and committed group that has even parted with quite large sums of money when the editors and the project have requested it. An instance of this was year two of Orsai when, “una comunidad de cinco mil setecientos lectores, de veinte países, nos dejó en garantía medio millón de dólares; un promedio de noventa dólares por cabeza” (“a community of five thousand seven hundred readers, from twenty countries, gave us as guarantee, half a million dollars; an average of ninety dollars per person”; “La fianza”). That achievement, following Neilsen, already seems rather extraordinary. Furthermore, the tone of textual exchanges is rather familiar and informal too. How does that compare to other similar online communities? In what way may Orsai be fostering high levels of prosociality?

Conversational and amicable tone are much sought after in online communities since they are conductive of an energetic environment leading up to the realization of a project, group formation, and – as it would be expected in the case of community brands – increased revenues. This, however, is not always the case in online forums, mailing lists, blogs, newspapers, magazines, and websites. Among all kinds of online communities there are varying degrees of “trolling” that often become attacks on brands, journalist,
writers and other community members. A working definition of “trolling” includes provoking circular, non-argumentative discussions (Herring), incendiary comments (Cox), rants (Naraine), conflict seeking (Donath) among other types of negative and confrontational behavior. Most interestingly, however, it has been argued that these attitudes might be performative, not reflective of a real user but caused instead by boredom and attention seeking (Shachaf).

Working specifically in the context of magazines, Amy Binns has established that “trolling and negative behaviour online is widespread across magazine websites” (21). Why this attitude is so widespread has been a research puzzle in the past couple of decades since computer mediated communication first came to the forefront. For Claire Hardaker, one of the reasons is:

because [computer mediated communication] can offer a very high degree of anonymity, and a great deal more control over a self-presentation than is available [face-to-face], but this anonymity can also foster a sense of impunity, loss of self-awareness, and a likelihood of acting upon normally inhibited impulses, an effect known as deindividuation. (223-24)

Studies like, John Suler’s “The Online Desinhibition Effect” have investigated the dissociation between online and offline identities leading up, usually, to over negativity, but also to over generosity. To counter this, many newspapers, magazines and other sites have instated moderation and/or made it a requirement to comment under your real name. The purpose of this is to flatten as much as possible the gap between online and offline identities that are apparently a factor in trolling. What can be learned from this is that online communities are ruled by their own logic and it would seem by the dynamics established from the start. “Internet communities who invest personal trust, emotional commitment, and private information, may find trolling particularly hurtful, distressing and inexplicable” (Hardaker 237).

I bring the issue of trolling into the discussion of Orsai because analysis has shown that the general attitude in the online community is, contrary to Binns and others’ findings, good-natured. The success of the project is a token of it. If Orsai failed to maintain the cohesion of its community the results would be, possibly, disastrous for the whole
enterprise. As has been argued before, because of its distribution system, Orsai is a project that is highly dependent on the integrity of its community, “Ustedes le pusieron el precio a la revista, ustedes la promocionan, ustedes compran las acciones, ustedes — sobre todo — la están convirtiendo en algo épico” (“You put a price on the magazine, you promote it, you buy the stock – and above all – you’re making it something epic”; “La pirámide invertida”). A decline in engagement could lead to a decrease in sales, leaving the sustainability of the expensive main project – the print magazine – and, in a domino effect, everything else at stake. Part of Casciari’s and Basilis’ work as editors of the project is to maintain the civility an even camaraderie, since that sense of trust and closeness has been the engine moving forward Orsai form the beginning. Cases of extreme closeness were explored in the examples of Juan Sklar and Rodrigo Solís. However, supporting financially Orsai on a regular basis – the ‘token’ exchange of money might be much more telling than anything else of how much the project ‘belongs’ to the readers. After all, as Jakob Nielsen has showed, it is when there is exchange of money that online communities tend to be least participatory (“Participation,” par. 22). Again, an aspect over which Orsai has prevailed.

Binns has made an interesting point arguing that “[magazine] editors generally want the readers to feel that the magazine belongs to them, going to great lengths to feature readers through letters pages or make-over shoots. It is standard practice to “reflect the reader back at them” by showing people of the same demographic and background. This attracts buyers and site visitors. However, it also means users may feel they can do what they like on “their” site” (6). These practices have been widely adopted by Orsai by featuring readers’ pictures, writing posts about them, printing their names and pictures in the magazine, and making them collaborators of the project in diverse roles. Acknowledging the readers’ identity, through mentions and pictures, the editors have thanked and included them. Prior to the publication of issue 10, for example, Casciari wrote:

En la edición N10 publicaremos – en seis páginas – las fotos de los más de cinco mil quinientos lectores que nos acompañaron este año con su suscripción. No solo es una manera de agradecerles el esfuerzo económico; también es un deseo que tuvimos a principio de año: conocer la cara de todos los lectores de una revista…. Esperamos de todo corazón que nadie
elija el anonimato…. Gracias por dar la cara. (“Dos pájaros de un tiro”)

In issue N10 we will publish – in six pages – the pictures of more than five thousand five hundred readers who accompanied us this year as subscribers. It is not just a way of thanking them for the economic effort, it is also a wish we had at the beginning of the year: to know the faces of all the magazine’s readers…. We hope wholeheartedly that nobody will chose anonymity…. Thanks for showing your faces.

Reigned by a sense of trust and support from its readers, Orsai does not even include a guidelines section for commenting, even though the site’s feedback thrives in the form of comments. A search through the site shows only one comment that could be taken as a ‘no-trolling’ warning, “Queda terminantemente prohibido… Buscar erratas en ORSAI REVISTA con ánimo crítico” (“It is strictly forbidden… to look for typos on ORSAI MAGAZINE with a critical aim”; “Aviso Legal”), but even this is too humorous in tone to be considered seriously, not even as a result of previous observations. Orsai is to a large extent a readers’ project, and readers themselves seem to take good care of it. The question is from where does the kind of sociality observed in Orsai stem. Prosocial behavior on the Internet has been studied in very particular cases, such as personality formation in adolescents (Subrahmanyam) and support communities related to health problems (Eichhorn; Amichai-Hamburger). As implied before a lot of social interaction in online contexts has been studied in terms of negative exchange, but even as early as 1999, Wellman and Gulia proposed that the internet could be a space of positive social behavior (“Virtual Communities”).

Michelle Wright and Yan Li have studied prosociality in online communities and social network contexts as expressed in concrete user actions like “say[ing] nice things”, “offer[ing] help”, “cheer[ing] someone up”, “let[ting] someone know I care about them” (1960). While this shows one level of prosocial behavior resembling rather closely face-to-face interactions, a different kind of prosocial practices more clearly associated with Web 2.0 dynamics of participation have also been identified. Termed “informational goods”, this sort of prosociality is more clearly the product of participatory platforms like GitHub for open-source software development, Wikipedia as the largest example of wiki technology, and Project
Gutenberg whose growing corpus depends on voluntary proofreading of digitized books, etc. It would seem that prosociality is behind the impulse to take part in Web 2.0 participatory media. While many instances of Web 2.0 are far from having an altruist bias, there seems to be a sense of something larger than the individual in these kinds of endeavors. It is the drive to act in a prosocial way that is really at stake with the appearance of trolling.

*Orsai* can be read as an example of both kinds of prosocial behavior, which “can be motivated by altruism (desire to benefit other with no concern for self), egoism (desire to benefit the self), or a combination of the two” (Sproull 147). As a project that has relied on mouth-to-mouth advertising from its own readers, and their crowd-funding efforts, it is the product of the kind of participation aiming at building something larger than the sum of its individual members, a form of altruism. In return, the project gives the readers back a community of like-minded people and a product in the form of the print magazine or any of the digital versions, as well as other forms of reward. An instance of this took place as Casciari reedited some of his earlier books in *Editorial Orsai* and offered early subscribers one of them as a gift: “los lectores que han comprado la suscripción de la revista antes del 10 de enero (es decir, los que confiaron sin saber) tendrán uno de esos libros de regalo” (“readers who bought the magazine subscription before January 10 (that is, those who trusted us blindly) will get one book as a gift”; “Colección Cayota”).

In the platform itself, the conversational and communal tone also displays prosocial behavior on a more personal, individual manner and can be observed through the acknowledgment of each of the actors’ role in the sustainability and success of the project. Word frequency explorations in over 30,000 comments left in any of the three blogs showed that the word “gracias” had one of the highest ratings. Occurring throughout the commentary corpus, thanking is a sure sign of an overall positive attitude in the readers’ interactions, radically opposed to the trolling behaviors so prevalent in magazine online communities discussed by Binns. Although constant, there have been slight peaks in gracias frequency correlating to
rewards from the editors, such as the release of free PDF versions and new future projections. (Fig. 34)

**Figure 34 Frequency distribution of Gracias.**

The beginning of the project as seen before has been, in terms of readers’ participation the most successful phase of Orsai. In gracias word frequency it is also the highest peak. This notwithstanding, thanking the editors, the authors and really anybody involved – readers included – is a constant practice that still gets enhanced in key episodes of the project. The release of the free N5 PDF version and the announcement of Orsai’s third year constitute subsequent peaks.

Most expressions of gratefulness are addressed to Casciari. As the front man behind the success of Orsai most expressions of gratitude fall upon him. Nevertheless, Casciari has been equally thankful to his readership on a regular basis. The many ways in which readers have been included in the publication have been to a large extent an acknowledgement of the determining role they have played in Orsai. Certainly thanking one another between editors and readers is a sure sign of prosocial behavior. Thanking may be seen as a way of establishing closeness to Casciari on the one hand; and on the other, as a way of rewarding readers and keeping them thus engaged with the project. Interpellations to both editors and the readers at large constitute also a group of words with high frequency distribution in the comments corpus as it can be observed in Fig. 35.
All of the nicknames and ways of referring to Casciari have been grouped under the category “Casciari” to show how pervasive the dialogue with him is in the comments. Constant interpellations to Basilis are not quite as elevated but still persistent throughout. “Lector”, a category including all possible combinations: *lector, lectores, lectora*, etc., has, like all other aspects, been rather prominent at the beginning of the project. The second highest peak corresponds to the key episode in the project when OrsaiBar was proposed and funded by the readers themselves.

Aside from the common thanking practices and the constant interpellations between editors and readers, there is another instance of prosocial behavior—a combination of altruism and egoism—where readers compete for prominence in the PRI game, but also offer guidance to the project for new comers, present their ideas and comment on the texts. The point of the PRI game is to be the first reader to comment on a new blog entry as soon as it is posted. The most active readers rush to the site and, probably without even reading the text, strive to be the first one to comment and mark their metaphorical conquest with the word PRI—short for “primero”. This practice was not always a part of Orsai. It started to appear sporadically late in 2004, and during the year-long hiatus between 2009 and 2010 the game pretty much disappeared. By the time Casciari returned to Orsai on September 23rd, 2010, the practice had been lost. The first attempts at bringing it back came soon afterwards and can already be read in “Renuncio” (September 30, 2010), but it took about a month—some 3-4 posts—to start taking the shape it has
now, from “La pirámide invertida” (October 28, 2010) onwards. The competition is so engrained and so important to the community’s practices that now it is possible to distinguish it as a particular kind of comment pattern that last for a relatively stable number of interventions and then it stops to give way to other kinds of reader comments (Fig. 36). The game has also been the arena for much reader-reader interaction. As new members join the community, it is not uncommon to have older readers explain to newer ones what the simple dynamics of the game are. Interestingly, the peaks in the graph below show that this process unfolds periodically once more roughly around the times of new issue publication or at the turn of a new year when there has been a reconfiguration of the distribution system, signaling that readers are drawn to the online community via the print magazine.

Figure 36 Frequency distribution of “PRI”.

The pattern shows the prevalence of the PRI game. Unlike other high frequency words, in this case, the initial peaks can be explained by the amount of new readers joining the community and the internal instruction that was carried out by older members to newer ones. This very phenomenon has been roughly replicated with each new issue or new year of the print magazine: a strong indicator that new members arrive in the online community because of the print magazine.
The PRI game speaks of high levels of sociality in Orsai’s community as seen in reader-reader interaction. Without having a particular meaning, the PRI game might be fulfilling what Roman Jakobson termed “the phatic function of language”. Intended “to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication between sender and receiver, to check whether the channel works, to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention” (355). While devoid of meaning, the phatic function of language is fulfilling a social function through “which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” as Malinowsky would have it (151). The PRI game constitutes an actual competition for prominence that grants a certain degree of visibility – and importance – in the community, an implied reward, but one that sustains the community’s cohesion. The PRI competition, though still a contest for prominence is indicative of the readers’ own consciousness regarding the existence of other community members and a particular practice governed by a simple set of rules.

It is not that there are no negative attitudes in Orsai, but they have not become prevalent to the point of hurting the regular kinds of interaction seen on the site. Casciari himself reflected on this early in 2012. The subscription system for the new year was just being implemented and was causing a lot of complaints from readers and, in general, a sense of confusion in how the project was going to work from then on.

una amiga, a la que no nombraré, me dice que tengo demasiada paciencia con mis lectores. Que nunca me enojo a pesar de que – siempre según mi amiga – a algunos habría que matarlos o por lo menos dejarlos en ridículo por imbéciles. Cierro comillas.

Yo no estoy de acuerdo con esto. No porque sea sosegado, ni porque nunca haya tenido ganas de responder con bilis. (A veces tuve.) Hay una razón por la que nunca, desde 2003, respondí un comentario con agresividad: y es que soy un animalito de internet. Si aprendí algo en estos años virtuales es que los foros se comportan exactamente igual que su anfitrión.

Orsai es un blog muy raro por muchas cosas. La que a mí me pone más orgulloso es que no hay otro blog de los llamados «exitosos» o «prehístoricos» capaz de mantener quinientos comentarios por texto, sin moderación previa, y que nunca se haya teñido todo de crisпación, de trolls y de spam. (“Señor director, dos puntos”)
a friend of mine, whom I won’t name, keeps telling me that I’m too patient with my readers. That I never get angry even though – still according to my friend – some would have to be killed or, at least, made to look like idiots. End of quote.

I don’t agree with this. Not because I’m calm and not because I never felt like replying angrily. (Sometimes I did). There is a reason why I never, since 2003, replied aggressively to a comment: it’s because I’m an Internet animal. If I learned something in these virtual years is that in forums people behave just like the host.

Orsai is a weird blog for many reasons. The one I’m most proud of is that there is no other blog you can call «successful» or «prehistoric» capable of keeping five hundred comments per text, non-moderated that never had been tinted with conflict from trolls and spam.

The differences in attitude preventing a large appearance of trolls in Orsai can be grouped into three: 1) Negative attitudes are not fed by the larger community and certainly not by Casciari himself. 2) Even when a negative tone might characterize a group of comments, these tend to remain on topic, as usual, the publication itself, the price of the magazine, the distribution system; and 3) The community has taken it into their own hands to police for this kind of comment – as well as for newcomers – and they act as moderators and informers themselves. Similarly, the fact that Casciari responds so widely to comments might be acting as an implied form of ‘house-keeping’ moderation. As a matter of fact Casciari holds the highest number of comments throughout at about 1,500, more than twice as much than the highest commenting reader. While in the research mentioned above, the issue of trolling has been observed to have the power to make or break the dynamics keeping a site together, this has not been the case in Orsai. Quite the contrary, not only are the levels of trolling practically null, there is a strong sense of community that can be observed in a variety of ways: emerging reader practices, signs of conviviality, and reader recurrence (Figs 37 and 38). Interestingly, even though a lot of the comments are directed towards Casciari and Basilis, as shown before, there is much reader-to-reader dialogue suggested by a minimum ratio of two comments per post from readers commenting in twenty-five posts or more.
Figure 37 Reader co-occurrence in 50 posts.

Only twenty-nine readers plus Hernán Casciari have commented on fifty or more blog posts constituting a small but consistent community. Almost all of them have passed the one hundred-comment mark indicating, at least, a double participation per post and suggesting that they were involved in dialogic exchanges.

Figure 38 Reader co-occurrence in 25 posts.

In contrast, just over a hundred readers have commented in twenty-five posts or more. As the number or recurrences lowers, a typical long tail pattern is drawn. The post/comment rate is similar at a minimum of two comments per post, again suggesting that readers engaged in dialogue and did have just a single intervention.

In the ten years since Casciari first opened Orsai as a blog, the community formed around it has seen many oscillations in reader behavior. Clay Shirky points out that “blogging is
a daily activity” and a lack of updates in a blog will cause a decrease in reader involvement (“Power Laws,” par. 17). Consequently, when in September 2010 Casciari announced the launch of the magazine, after a year-long hiatus from posting on the blog, a lot of the community cohesive practices were not current anymore. Nevertheless, many readers returned and adjusted to the renewed materiality of the project. There was, so to speak, a reconstitution of the community’s practices as Orsai reconfigured its mediality.

According to Sproull, “each context for online prosocial behavior can be understood by characteristics of its tasks and social structures, by what motivates its participants, and by its trust dynamics” (146). In Orsai, considering the structure of the social network outlined in the methodology, it might be argued that the motivation behind community’s prosocial behavior is to keep the project going, and keeping the project alive means its story continues, and community members can keep on sharing with each other. In a way, by keeping the story of the project going means that there is a community, a third space, the global narrative shared by the readers.

La cuestión tiene más que ver con la confianza – y con la integración analogica – que con la revista en sí misma o con internet. Gente en todas partes que se sorprende de entregar dinero a desconocidos. Personas que descubren, por azar, que hay otros en su zona (quizá a doscientos metros) que tienen los mismos gustos. Pibes que se juntan a cenar, que programan reuniones para enero, cuando los ejemplares lleguen a destino; que en breve serán amigos. (“Clic”)

The issue has more to do with trust – and the analog integration – than with the magazine itself or with the Internet. Everywhere, people are surprised to be giving away money to strangers. People who happen to find out there are others in their area (maybe two hundred meters away) who have the same tastes. Dudes who like to get together for dinner, who are scheduling meetings for January, when the issue reaches their destination, and who will, in brief, be friends.

Even when each new episode or development of the project seems much more capricious than the previous one, readers have lent themselves to Orsai. Regarding this, Sproull has proposed that “if people agree to do a prosocial act, they will be more likely to agree to do a related, larger one in the future” (149). Taken into the context of Orsai, Sproull’s assertion might be indicating that the flow of prosocial behavior in the project runs deep
and constantly. For as innovative as the entire Orsai enterprise seems, it is still striking that it is the narrative of the project that brings together the efforts of so many people. Taking part of the project for both readers, as well as authors, is becoming part of a community and at the same time being part of the story that sustains an increasingly ambitious project. Editorial Orsai, one of the episodes in the story – a development in the project – that has not been implemented as it was first projected is perhaps a loose end in the potentiality of the project’s community. For Casciari, a publishing house relying on readers’ reviews to decide what books to publish was the ultimate gesture of a mature online community:

solo en estos tiempos comienzan a florecer las comunidades virtuales maduras, capaces de convertirse en inversoras económicas de sueños propios colectivos. Lo descubrimos entre todos, y casi sin querer, el año pasado.

Hay muy pocas comunidades virtuales (de gran número de usuarios, y de un target amplio en edad y geografía) que hayan practicado la confianza y la honestidad del modo en que lo hicieron los lectores de Orsai en 2011. Fue una entrega demoledora, y en muchos momentos emocionante, rara, inusual. (“Una lengua común”)

Only in these times mature virtual communities start to flourish and become capable of investing in their own collective dreams. We realized it all together, and almost by accident, last year.

There are very few virtual communities (of a large number of users and an ample age and geography scope) that have practiced trust and honesty like Orsai’s readers did in 2011. It was an astonishing effort, and at many times exciting, rare, unusual.

Doubtless, what can be seen from Casciari’s own writing is that the behaviors observed in the comments platform have correlated with the economic and moral support the project has received to continue into its third year, indicating, on the one hand, the power of Orsai’s narrative to maintain its readership, but also a correlation between online and offline reader involvement. This is perhaps the way in which the story of Orsai has spilled most tangibly off the screen and into the lives of its participants, by realizing that they are part of the project, that they have been involved in it from its start and that without them, Orsai might have had a very different story.
The issue of self-consciousness has already been touched upon throughout this thesis in regards to intermediality, transmediality, metarepresentation, metafiction and, in particular, the global narrative of Orsai. As I have outlined, the structure of the narrative has in place a self-referential system that unites all of the fragments and keeps the cohesion of the global narrative. This system is, on the one hand, a textual and digital apparatus and, on the other, an emergent component of the textual content (in the form of intertextuality, allusion and remediation) of many of the pieces and what readers make up out of them. In other words, this level of self-referentiality and self-consciousness, has only been explored in this study on the level of Orsai’s textual input. In this section, I explore how Orsai readers have a preference for self-referential pieces and how much they replicate the self-referential apparatus. Before moving on, I wish to draw attention back to Figs. 32 and 33, in which as explained it becomes rather patent that the biggest expressions of reader involvement in the form of comments have consistently taken place around the same time as media developments in Orsai. I take that as an unmistakable indication that readers, as far as we can account for from the existing dataset, are mostly interested in the narrative of the project. In the following pages, content analysis of readers’ comments also shows that much of the talk going on in the blog is related to the project itself. For this analysis I first relied on the most frequent words found in the whole comments corpus, among them ‘orsai’ and ‘revista’ (Fig. 39).
Following the apparent semantic trend as an indicator of self-referential talk about the project, I hand picked a series of related terms. As the series of graphs presented below show, some of these words shed light on the content of the more than 30,000 comments analyzed (leaving out the comments in the web magazine), while others remain rather unremarkable. It is also notorious that, except in the cases of ‘Orsai’ (Fig. 40), and ‘blog’, ‘bar’, ‘revista’ (Fig. 41), all of the other words follow a pattern equal to the general pattern of total comments. This is indicative only of the fact that when there are more comments, i.e. more words, there is a higher occurrence of these words as well. It is also not very significant if there is a correlation with a particular development and frequent mentions of said development. As expected, ‘Orsai’ is one of highest frequency words. Ubiquitous through the whole corpus it points towards a remarkable interest in the project itself and its account. Interestingly, as well, the notion of ‘historia’ is rather prevalent in the corpus, also emphasizing a sense of narrative construction. One reader comments: “El mundo nuevo vende historias. El mundo viejo vende papel” (“The new world sells stories. The old world sells paper”; “Para ti, Lucía”). This particular instance, for as brief as it is, constitutes a perfect example of readers discussing new publishing modes, a non-medium dependent notion of story, and the narrativization of Orsai as a story that is being sold.

![Graph of frequency distribution of “Orsai”, “proyecto”, and “historia”](image)

**Figure 40** Frequency distribution of “Orsai”, “proyecto”, and “historia”.
Whereas ‘proyecto’ is prominent at the beginning of the project, its frequency loses significance. ‘historia’ is a random constant speaking of a sense of narrativity and the narration of Orsai itself. ‘Orsai’, on the other hand, as it would be expected remains perhaps, the most common topic of discussion. Conversations in the blog are, highly self-referential.

![Figure 41 Frequency distribution of “revista”, “blog”, “bar”, and “editorial”](image)

Two parallel processes between ‘blog’ and ‘editorial’ and ‘magazine’ and ‘bar’ in which the constant pervasiveness of one is matched by the novelty of new media additions.

In the second graph the already pervasive notion of ‘blog’ is equaled by ‘editorial’ most likely around the time the publishing house was projected. A parallel phenomenon takes place between ‘revista’ and ‘bar’. The emphasis on the novelty of the print magazine is radically noticeable early in the corpus. Its decrease can be explained by a dwindling feeling of novelty as the print publication became normalized. In contrast, the projection of the bar is most likely signaled in the peak and for a short lived period becomes as important as the print magazine. Both cases in this graph indicate that reader activity is
sparked by media additions to the project. Bringing a sense of novelty, new instances of the project seem to be embraced.

Judging from these two targeted content analysis, it is possible to argue that there is a significant degree of interest on the part of readers in – and with it an awareness of – the development of the narrative as a story, the narration of the project that has been unfolding, and in the very media platforms pertaining to the project. In sum, I suggest that the discussion of the readers with high levels of self-consciousness about the project’s story and its mediality reinforces the construction of the third space where readers themselves can interact. In their exchanges, readers have formed and kept their community, they inscribe themselves in the story of the development of Orsai.

One of the arguments I have through this study is that the story of Orsai is, precisely, the narrative of its media additions, the formation of a community around it and, in sum, of its coming into being as it has been unfolding over the last two years. Borrowing a common cliché from the film industry: Orsai’s story is based on a true story. The blunt materialization of Orsai in the form of the print magazine, and even more so, in OrsaiBar has granted the story a tangible correlate. But just as it happens in ‘true-story’ movies, there is a long distancing between what ‘really’ happens and what makes it into the movie: episodes are trimmed, edited and characters colored. In the narrative of Orsai, aside from the authorial and editorial decisions on what and where to publish, the particular affordances of each media is contributing to the final form of the global narrative including how readers can interact with it. Digital platforms like blogs might have shrunk publication times, they might have also opened up the door for a direct relationship between authors, editors and readers. Nevertheless, the ‘time’ between experience and the narration of such experience is not just mediated by time, but as I have proposed, by a set of complex cognitive mechanisms affecting how it is rendered verbally, or even in our memory. What goes on in that process is the creation of a narrated world, one that will be told and later on re-created when read.

The implications of this is that, even though there seems to be an immediate access to the story as it unfolds, its mediation and our own tendency to fictionalize stories have already
created one other world, a third space, the global narrative. It is to this third space that we have direct and immediate access, the one that has really kept readers involved at every level: financially, textually, verbally, physically. In Orsai, this is further enhanced because there are many avenues, many different media instances, allowing interaction with the story and its participants. The recreation of Orsai is not done in isolation but collectively appealing to the imperative of sharing information and relating to others through stories. Because Orsai’s is not a narrative that looks back into how the process of its creation transpired, but one that essays its own changing status, its unstable creation, readers following the story have witnessed Orsai’s materializations – as a print, web, electronic magazine – as well as the development of its narrative correlate. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has theorized the emergence of an autobiographical self in the process of its being non-verbally, but mentally narrated responsible for identity building, not unlike Orsai’s coming into being:

Looking back, with the license of metaphor, one might say that the swift, second-order nonverbal account narrates a story: that of the organism caught in the act of representing its own changing status as it goes about representing something else. But the astonishing fact is that the knowable entity of the catcher has just been created in the narrative of the catching process. (170, emphasis in the original)

Hand in hand, the narrative and the enterprise in Orsai, have both undergone a cumulative development. The enterprise has provided a reason to propose projects and narrate their development, while the narration has, literally, given shape to and sold the project. The most obvious result coming out of Orsai are the various digital and analogue media products. Because they have a materiality and have a knowable existence they provide a common ground for authors, editors and readers – the real world component needed in sustainable online communities. But out of this materiality has emerged an extended consciousness – as Damasio would understand it – of what Orsai is, its global narrative shared by all the actors. This is what Comequechu (the project’s cook) meant when he pointed out to Casciari and Basilis that the project was no longer theirs (“Bar mediante”). This doesn’t mean that it belongs just to the readers, but that it is also beyond them. For all matters the editors and other close collaborators have the control over what goes on in Orsai, nevertheless, the surplus of the narrative in the readers’ collective
imagery and the resulting space of interaction is well out of anybody’s hands.

What Damasio terms an extended consciousness is not unlike the third space proposed by Harrington. Extended consciousness, however, is a mental artifact. The virtuality of this third place does not come just from the digital platforms – although they add to it – but from the construction of a space of interaction, a common subject to talk about, a project to sustain and, even in our changing information world of some ideals to sustain. The Internet does provide a virtual space, a stage for the process of extended consciousness to take place. The virtuality of Orsai resides in its latent narrative; the story anticipates its continuation, and readers are well aware that, for the story to continue, they must go on taking part in it.
Conclusions

In this thesis I have advanced a broad-spectrum approach to narrative in the age of media convergence. Based on the insights gathered from *Orsai*, the case study, I have sought to characterize a narrative tendency that appears to be fostering a renewed form of metafiction aided by, but not dependent on, digital media. The term proposed for this phenomenon, interstory is a kind of narrative developing in several media, platforms, and devices. An interstory exists as two levels of narration: the story fragments and a global narrative that emerges out of the combinations put together by readers. The global narrative demarcates the scope of the world created. The connections between the smaller story fragments are laid out by an author or editor, but actualized by readers. The relations that hold all of an interstory’s components together are a tightly interwoven referential apparatus relying on media interaction and intersection. In order to delineate the concept of interstory, I have established a three-layer concept of medium drawing from the literature on intermediality and media convergence. Medium, as understood in this thesis, is a composite of semiotic phenomenon, the channel or technology of communication that renders it and the individual and cultural practices associated with them. Therefore, when I say that interstory develops in different media, I suggest that it can happen at any of the levels of medium, and usually happens in a domino effect whereby a modification of one layer expands onto the others.

My characterization of interstory constitutes a distinct development of previous conceptualizations of narrative fiction in our current media ecology such as transmedia storytelling and multimodal novels. Because interstory is an unfinished, forward-looking narrative, reader participation is critical. Additionally, unlike many instances of transmedia storytelling, interstories do not have the economic backup from a media conglomerate but depend on their audience for economic sustainability. Interstory is also different from multimodal novels inasmuch as it is not restricted to a genre, but thought of as a narrative tendency. I have sought to address these three distinctions through the often taken for granted role of the reader in putting together the narrative cognitively and materially.
Over this basis I have examined *Orsai* from two approaches. In the first one, I pay special attention to the structural composition of *Orsai* through the innermost layers of the media it touches, the way in which distribution and selling practices have impacted what is published in its pages or screens, and the intricate relationships among its components. In the second approach, the focus is put on the collective practices associated with reading a story through distinct media instances, the sense of community it fosters, and the creation of a third space of metafictional engagement delineated by the emerging global narrative. One aspect has stood out the most: the figure of the reader. Historically characterized in literary theory as an abstract entity emerging out of the text, in this thesis I have proposed an approach for the study of actual readers’ reading traces in the form of comments left on a text. This has only been possible thanks to the interactive affordances of digital platforms, in this particular case, of comment-enabled blogs. As a result, this work is a contribution not just to the study of reading practices in the digital age from a participatory perspective, but also to theorizations of the reader coming out of Reader Response theory, Poststructuralism and Biocultural criticism.

The study of *Orsai*’s readers would not be possible if it were not for Casciari’s and Basilis’ success at building a story that has brought together a considerable number of readers and prompted the formation of an active online and offline community. The particular focus and configuration of *Orsai* has facilitated and taken advantage of readers’ involvement. Nevertheless, the media and narrative structure has propitiated such involvement. The self-referential narrative of the project has seen *Orsai*’s own coming into being. Its materialization both in the physical world as well as in the digital one has emerged from the narrative itself, a sort of autofiction or autobiography of the project that I have identified as the global narrative. *Orsai*’s development has also laid out a path for readers to follow and, as though it were a game, they must go on participating (buying the magazine, commenting on the blogs, attending the bar events, being part of the community) if the story is to be continued. *Orsai*’s economic sustainability is thus highly dependent on how persuasive the narrative is.

During the twenty-eight month period analyzed in this study, it is possible to observe a clear rise of *Orsai* narrative pieces output in the days preceding the publication of each
new magazine issue, or coinciding with the proposition of a new media instance of the project. This points to the fact that the narrative is geared towards the development of the project itself much more than to any other type of content. Furthermore, these episodes are also the ones that have sparked higher reader activity. Even more impressive is the fact that at such determining moments for the project and the narrative, readers have lent altruistically themselves not only to commenting on the blog, but also to launching online protests, parting with considerable sums of money, and volunteering to carry out tasks for the sake of the project.

The difficulty to spark activity in online community members is a well-documented fact. The more personal the activity – like giving out money and volunteering – the harder it is to achieve. The fact that this has not been the case in Orsai speaks of a heightened sense of prosociality in the community built around the project. It can even be looked at as an actualized participatory media platform in which, instead of user-generated content, there is user action. How have Casciari and Basilis been able to foster a community of such characteristics? I propose, it is through narrative strategies: most saliently projection and anticipation. A large portion of the self-referential narrative has actually dealt with projections about what Orsai is about to become: first from blog to magazine, then to publishing house, then to bar and so on; and about how the project is going to function: payment and distribution systems, publication dates and details. Another large portion is about what the project offers: handpicked content and graphics in the print magazine, a free PDF version, an exclusive interview or chronicle, discounts and perks for supporting the project, etc. – in other words, a promise of the project’s quality. Projection and anticipation trigger a forward-looking movement in the narrative. The narrative does not look at what has happened in the project, but at what is going to happen. Most of the times, the proposed project developments might be well underway, but narratively they are presented as a budding idea waiting for readers to support it, adopt it and, ultimately, fund it. The readers’ role is vital both metaphorically, and actually. Consequently, there is a sense of conditionality in the project’s forward-looking narrative, not unlike Scheherazade’s story: it continues provided that Orsai is kept alive.
I draw this parallel not as a way to extol Casciari, Basilis and Orsai, but as way of moving towards the other aspects of this thesis: the pervasiveness of narrative throughout human history, and the fact that even though we might be living through a technological revolution, deeply ingrained narrative practices continue to be alive and valid. I have expanded the scale of this thesis so clearly focused in one single case study building these arguments over three bases: 1) evolutionary studies of art, 2) cognitive science, and 3) technogenesis.

Evolutionary studies of art have allowed me to examine how spontaneously narrative occurs in social interaction. The most persistent quality of storytelling is the need to share information in a non-genetic manner to establish a common ground over which individuals build ties. As a mechanism through which people navigate the world – remember the past, make future projects and understand the present – narrative thinking is found in day to day exchanges. This does not mean that all narrative thinking is conductive of storytelling, and much less of literary narrative; nevertheless, it points to the fact that we have a tendency to narrativize and even fictionalize real life events effortlessly. As a consequence, the many social interactions taking place in online contexts and in so many distinct platforms are conductive of storytelling. Because they are ubiquitous these days, online narrativized social interactions also tend to blur the lines between actual and fictional information, and have already produced many valuable examples of literary narrative.

There has been much critical discussion on whether the new contexts found in our current media ecology – largely dependent on the digital but still closely holding on to print – are, indeed, propitious to both literary narrative creation and recreation. Cognitive studies on reading have shown that learning how to read causes an anatomical rewiring in areas of the brain originally used for other purposes like object recognition. Although the effect on the cognitive process of reading carried out on digital devices is still unknown, I propose that a new set of skills might be appearing to deal with the demands of reading in digital media. Among them, I sustain, is a sense of intermediality that is much visible in digital narratives whereby reading does not only pertain to textual written language, but also to the construction of, for example, a story content through sound, image, and the
spatiality and interactive capacities of the platforms. This new set of skills is reinforced by the proliferation of media platforms and devices, and characterizes the diverse ways of getting involved in an interstory. Narratives like interstories are not bound to a single artifact but are created by the readers’ own impulse to follow it. My discussion of Orsai should leave no doubt that new media platforms and the set of skills associated with them are, indeed, conducive of rich narratives.

A story needs to spark deep reading engagement if it is to be successful in moving readers around platforms and media, even more so if the story’s sustainability depends economically on them, as is the case in Orsai. To explain high levels of narrative engagement I have reviewed the studies on transportation, worldmaking and metarepresentation. I argue that some degree of worldmaking is a precondition for narrative comprehension that is achieved by means of metarepresentation – a mental mapping of the information coming in from a story. Metarepresentation depends heavily on Theory of Mind – a cognitive mind-reading skill responsible for our sense of empathy. For Brooks Bouson, empathy is "what ultimately draws us to the fictional world of the text and underlies our relationship to the characters we encounter there. [It is] the resonant human echo to a shared experience" (The Empathic Reader). In that sense, engaging in narrative reading is a means of sharing experience, and the same time, the impulse to share experience is the driving force behind narrative production.

A narrative, consequently, must be capable of offering an experience as close as a live one if it is to foster reader engagement. The spilling of the story world off the page and the screen that happens in Orsai is the stage where that experience is lived both as part of a story and as part of the physical world. The overflow of narrative, as we have seen, prompts much reader activity and gives way to the emergent global narrative. Doubts on whether digital narratives are capable of arising the same kind of experience as print literature have been vocally expressed. In contrast to this, I have demonstrated that although it might be distinct of it, interstories do, in fact, produce meaningful experiences for their readers. The reason for this is that no technology is ever developed outside of our evolved human cognitive and social architectures.
Digital narratives like interstory, I maintain, might not be fostering the same kind of experiences, but analogous ones. Narrative experiences are surely being refashioned from print reading into the extended notion of intermedial reading used in this work. The reason for this is because the shared experience of narrative is non-media dependent. The history of human technological development has obeyed the need to address a particular, recurrent problem. In narrative, the imperative to tell stories has propitiated that new media is easily turned narrative media. A particular medium in which a story is told affects the way we relate to it, and might enhance or obscure specific aspects of storytelling, but it does not prevent narratives from being experienced meaningfully. The shared experience of narrative depends on the construction of the narrated world, not on the specific affordances of the media available or developed at any given time.

Digital media, I believe, is by no means a threat to literary narrative production. This thesis has been an effort to prove that. On the contrary, high levels of textual production in online platforms are bound to produce valuable stories. Particular affordances of digital media and, even more so, of media convergence have highlighted, even literalized, how readers come to inhabit a story’s place, time and practices. Aided by the virtuality of digital media, the construction of shared narrated worlds tends towards actualization. Readers’ participation in a narrative is both mental and actual, and this only makes narratively constructed worlds more easily shared and more engaging. Taking Orsai as a symptomatic example of the developments storytelling is undergoing in these days, I argue that this kind of narrative engagement constitutes an actualization of the premises of metafiction. The success of a cultural object, like Orsai, might very well be the result of forming a community with a heightened sense of prosociality. Readers’ deep, and often altruistic, involvement is a testament that the human craving for narratives is still a creative driving force capable not only of bringing together a closely-knit community, but also of manipulating all the media available at any given time to tell and share a story. Hence, media developments are not dictating what narrative looks like, what it does, or how we use it; instead, readers and authors, through joint (re)creations are making sure media fulfill our ancient human craving for stories.
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