

Off Center Episode 1: Introducing the Center for Digital Narrative

Scott Rettberg with Jill Walker Rettberg

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SR: Welcome to Off Center, the podcast about digital narrative. My name is Scott Rettberg, and I'm the director of the Center for Digital Narrative at the University of Bergen in Norway.

JWR: And I'm Jill Walker Rettberg, co director of the Center for Digital Narrative.

SR: At the Center for Digital Narrative, we're trying to define a new independent research field focused on digital narrative that integrates things like electronic literature, digital culture, game studies, computational narrative systems, AI, VR, and other emerging fields of digital narrative. In this podcast series, we'll have conversations with researchers, artists, and authors who are exploring the frontiers of digital narrative, as well as experts in fields such as game studies to discuss topics that are emerging around digital narrative.

JWR: So, Scott, this is the first episode of the podcast series. What are you planning for it?

SR: I'm planning to talk to the researchers at the Center for Digital Narrative about topics ranging from game studies to AI and VR and to new forms of electronic literature that are emerging in digital media. I guess maybe we should both talk a little bit about how we arrived at digital narrative as a subject or a topic of interest, which eventually led to this center. Maybe you could talk a little bit about your early experiences of hypertext, of different kinds of storytelling that you encountered.

JWR: Well, when I was a kid in the 80s, my dad was a programmer, and I loved to read. We had a computer at home, and I played *Zork*, and I think you did too, didn't you, about that time?

SR: Yeah, that was actually what got me into working with computers to begin with, was the opportunity to have a computer game that I could write to and that would write back to me.

JWR: A way you can explore stories, discover things. I love those hint books. Did you have those at all when you got stuck and you couldn't figure out how to get through the twisty little passages or whatever?

SR: Didn't have those. But we did have some grid paper where we would actually draw out the maps of the dungeons and try to figure out where we were and where the hall of the Mountain King was.

JWR: Oh, we did that too, which is a very different way of thinking about a story than just reading a book. Then we got access to computers at the university I was at and the Internet, and I discovered hypertext fiction. How did you discover that?

SR: Well, it was kind of funny because I remember I was doing my master's degree and I actually remember the day, I was in a class that was sort of focused on desktop publishing. And the teacher came in and said, you got to see what they just did down at the University of Illinois, because I was at Illinois State University. And he showed us Mosaic, the first Web browser. And I'd done things with email and fetch and things like that before but when I saw a web browser and I saw that you could publish text and you could publish images and you could distribute it around the world instantaneously, I thought, this is it. This is something I want to be working with now. And then I started working for an Internet company, actually, very early on, doing a website about authors. Originally, I started doing my own website called Books in Chains about literature. And then I was hired by the sort of nascent Internet company to set up a website about literature.

JWR: That must have been exciting.

SR: Yeah. And I sort of stumbled into hypertext via that, via reading about that and then doing a story about hypertext. And I said to a group of friends, let's try writing one of these.

JWR: Because we both studied literature, although I was in comparative literature, whereas you were doing creative writing as well, right?

SR: Yeah, and eventually comparative literature, too. And I think the exciting thing for me was the connection to the types of stories I was interested in reading and writing, kind of coming out of the postmodernism. That was a strand of American fiction, 1980s, 1990s, 1970s, where people were rearranging stories and rethinking the framing of stories, rethinking points of view, rethinking orders of stories, rethinking ways that you could tell stories to sort of break the frame and represent it. And I really saw hypertext doing that.

JWR: So I wrote my master's thesis on hypertext in comparative literature. Went on to do a PhD on digital stories and art. While you were busy setting up the electronic literature organization.

SR: Yeah. After we wrote *The Unknown*, this hypertext novel about a book tour, it won an award. And I met the the novelist Robert Coover, as well as some Internet capitalists at this very strange event that was technologists and writers together. And we decided to work together, start a nonprofit organization focused on electronic literature that's now 24 years old. I think that dates me, but it's 24 years old, so that's still kind of central to a field. And then I taught in a new media studies program that I helped to start. And then I was enticed over here to Bergen. I was very pleased by a woman who I loved.

JWR: Did you back then, ever think you'd start a Center of Excellence on digital narrative?

SR: Well, you know, in a way, it doesn't surprise me too much. When I first got here to Bergen, we organized a European research project called ELMCIP: Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice.

JWR: You're always great with the acronyms.

SR: It just rolls off the tongue. But that was a gathering of European researchers on a collaborative research project that really brought together a bunch of different perspectives on digital storytelling and digital poetics and resulted in a database that remained central to the field, the Electronic Literature Knowledge Base. And I've sort of

always thought of what you and I have been doing together in the digital culture program, bringing in guest researchers, bringing in visiting PhDs, hiring people who really bring different perspectives on digital narrative from different fields. In a way, I sort of always thought that we were building a center. So when the opportunity came up to apply for a Norwegian Center of Excellence, I remember thinking, this is a big long shot, but why not? Why shouldn't we throw our hats in the ring?

JWR: So I know you've explained this many times before, but electronic literature, I'm sure some people listening won't really know what that is.

SR: I would say, essentially, electronic literature is new forms of literature that utilize the affordances of the computer, of the network, of the digital cultural context in the creation of new kinds of literary experiences, new kinds of storytelling.

JWR: So *Zork*, that we played in the 80s, is an example of electronic literature?

SR: So *Zork* is an example of electronic literature. And in fact, you could go back to the very beginnings of computing. There were contemporaries of Alan Turing, Christopher Strachey, who wrote the Love Letter Generator, this little computer program that generated sort of absurdist love letters. So we're not looking at a pretty long history. Over 70 years of electronic literature, which has been more prevalent in the last, say, 20 to 30 years. Still a minority field, I'd say, in terms of when people think of the literary mainstream, but a fascinating field of experimentation.

JWR: So we both came to digital narrative through electronic literature, video games a bit, but what do you think having a sense for digital narrative lets us do that if it was just about video games or just electronic literature?

SR: Well, look, I think back in the 1990s, as you'll recall, you were one of the organizers of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference--

JWR: --with Espen Aarseth, who was my advisor when I was a PhD student.

SR: Yeah. A pioneering theorist of--

JWR: video games, cybertext--

SR: Yeah. Eventually sort of helped found the field of game studies. And at that time, you were able to bring together a conference where you would have people who are studying the digital from a cultural perspective, people who are studying digital art, people who are studying computer games, people are studying electronic literature, people who are studying the beginnings of the Internet and what was happening to the culture there. And you were able to bring them all together in one place to exchange ideas. Now, what happened over time was those fields sort of split off and became their own fields. And in a way, we've generated a huge amount of knowledge in all these fields. But what we want to do is bring those fields back together and focus specifically on this question of algorithmic narrativity.

JWR: We'd probably better explain that, too, hadn't we?

SR: Yeah, we should.

JWR: You throwing it back to me? Narrative is clearly one of the really important ways humans make sense of the world. And of ourselves. This is one of the premises for the center. And with digital technology, this is changing a lot. Like, the ways we tell stories are just changing. The fact that kids are experiencing stories in video games or in fan fiction and in social media, and not just in books and movies. It makes a difference. And we call it algorithmic narrativity because it's narrative. I mean, people have been telling stories since the Stone Age, well, long before the Stone Ages, I would imagine. But now these algorithms, AIs of different kinds, are influencing that.

SR: Yeah, not only influencing, I'd say maybe even structuring it. Some theorists would argue that the machines are structuring our thoughts, right? This is something that the theorist Friedrich Kittler said when he was talking about Nietzsche switching from handwritten manuscripts to typewriting. This is something that Nietzsche said that the way that he wrote changed as a result of the change in technologies. And now, of course, we're literally looking at technologies that completely restructure language. Whatever we want to say about artificial intelligence, it's reacting to us in a different way than other sorts of text

technologies did before. But I think also we can think about algorithmic narrativity in broader ways. For example, if we look at the elections that we've had in recent years, and we look at the way that certain narratives have been propagated. So if you look at how was Donald Trump elected anyway? And what is this QAnon? I mean, that's a narrative. This sprawling, crazy, absurdist narrative that many people bought into and then changed their political affiliations as a result.

JWR: Yeah. And certain narratives are more likely to be promoted in social media because of the way recommendation algorithms work. We have people actually trying to optimize what they put on social media so that it will get spread more easily and stuff.

SR: Yeah. And if you think about, for example, memes, who would have thought 20 years ago that silly pictures with a caption underneath them would become one of the most prominent forms of political discourse? Yeah, this is crazy. And yet it's a form of digital narrative.

JWR: So we'd be studying memes as well at the Center for Digital Narrative.

SR: Certainly that might be one of the forms that we engage with when we look at how ideas and narratives spread around social media. And then, of course, computer games.

JWR: Yeah, they're huge.

SR: They're a dominant form, maybe you'd say *the* dominant form of expression in our age, and certainly a dominant form of entertainment. Much of culture, if we look maybe at a generation after ours and certainly the generation after that, our children's generation, this is a social space. It's an entertainment space, but it's also where people get together with their friends in the way that maybe we used to have sandlot baseball games when I was a kid or play tag or Vietnam War. That was strange. We actually played --

JWR: You played Vietnam War?

SR: It was like a sad kind of tag. Yeah. So I think one of the projects in our center is going to be Kristine Jørgensen's separately funded project with the National Research Council,

Understanding Male Gamers. This is going to be a kind of specific zeroing in on the ways that games shape male identity and the ways that young men, in a way, are shaped by the way that they play these games and the way that they play with each other. Oh, we haven't talked about computational narrative systems. Nick would be disappointed.

JWR: Oh, don't worry. We can talk about this. Maybe we should just talk a bit about what the Center will actually be like. There should be these five nodes. Right. Scott, you'll be leading well, you'll be directing it to start with and also leading the--

SR: --Extending Digital Narrative--

JWR: Thank you. I'll be leading a node on social media narratives. Nick Monfort will be leading a node on computational narrative systems. So this is like ways in which you can program systems that generate narratives in various ways.

SR: And Nick is a professor at MIT and a 20% professor with us, so we're very lucky to have him. Yeah. And of course, extended digital narrative. We're going to be looking at these new environments like AI. How does narrative function in AI, like extended reality environments although-- the metaverse might be becoming a thing of the past very quickly-- but I think it's still worth looking at in terms of thinking about how do these enhanced sensory environments change the way that we experience stories and also things like conversational narratives. You think back to our early experiences of Zork. Well, now we're able to actually talk to these devices, to these computers, and they answer back to us in a voice that's very much like a human voice, and that changes the nature of the interface profoundly.

JWR: Yeah. And then we've got the two other nodes, too, that we mentioned earlier. There's one on video games led by Kristine Jørgensen and one on electronic literature led by Joe Tabbi.

SR: And to reiterate the social media narratives node which you are leading.

JWR: Yes.

SR: Okay, great. Well, I think that's a good introduction to the Center in terms of the scale of it. Yeah.

JWR: What's it going to look like?

SR: We're going to have our own building.

JWR: I know. I sort of want to bring everyone and show them the building.

SR: Yeah, me too. I'm looking forward to it. We do need to build it out a little bit. We need to kick some people out. But one of the fascinating things is that this is going to be one of the oldest buildings on campus that we're going to be adapting, updating, bringing in some labs. We're going to have some sort of gaming lab. We're going to have some spaces for presentations. It's going to be very collaboration-oriented. But even more important than that, I think, is the people that we're bringing in. In addition to these sort of node leaders, we have 20% professors who are working with each node. And these range from people like Rafael Pérez y Pérez, who's an expert on computational narrative systems in Mexico City, who's written programs that tell stories, to Lai-Tze Fan, who's done a lot of work with electronic literature from a feminist perspective and looking at the ways that conversational interfaces shape us.

JWR: We have Lin Prøitz who will be working with me on the social media narrative. She's an expert on visual narratives and social media here in Norway. And Doris Rusch will be working with Kristine on the games node. She's a games studies expert in Sweden.

SR: In Sweden, yeah. And we have in Canada, Caitlin Fisher, who's a long term storyteller in experimental environments like XR and VR.

JWR: And then we're going to have PhD students and postdocs. I just met our first PhD student who's been hired, Tegan Pyke. I was just showing her around a bit today. She arrived this week. We're very excited.

SR: Yeah. And she's going to be trying to expand the reach of the field of electronic literature, specifically to bring in voices from other parts of the world. And we're going to

be starting with eight PhD students, two postdocs. With the XDN project, there's going to be David Jhave Johnston, who's an AI expert and poet, who actually did a poetry project with AI back in 2017, where he trained a machine learning system with a corpus of tons of poetry scraped from the Internet. Classic poetry. And then every month for a year, he published a book of poems that he edited from the output of those programs, a twelve-volume set of poetry. That's actually pretty good.

JWR: I've got to say. The way that AI and large language models have just launched so hugely in the last half year, it's really exciting to be starting a center for digital narrative at this exact time.

SR: Yeah, it's amazing because when I first wrote that XDN proposal for the Extending Digital Narrative project three years ago, I remember the first reviewer's comments they had in the section on AI, they had it sort of circled. Are there any examples of this?

JWR: They wouldn't question that it's really going.

SR: Is this really going to be a thing? So the the explosion of activity in that area and all of the different perspectives on it right now, it's amazing serendipity. Should we talk a little bit about what kinds of research we'll be doing?

JWR: Yeah. Although we're really going to have to take like it will take us years to explain all that.

SR: About ten.

JWR: All right. Yeah. Because we're launching this summer, summer 23, and it's a ten-year center, we're funded for ten years. We got about €15 million from the Norwegian Research Council. So yeah, it's going to be really exciting--

SR: That sounds better in kroner.

JWR: Million, 155,000,000 kroner.

SR: But anyway, the sorts of research we're going to be doing range from traditional humanistic research where we're actually just reading works and writing about them in historical literary contexts, comparing them to conventional literary genres, to focus groups, working with studying male gamers in their own voices. And a thing that I'm very excited about is experimental research, where we're actually working with creative writers and digital artists and exploring the potentialities of these new forms for storytelling, seeing how they affect us, how they affect our consciousness, our sensory apparatus, our experiences of narrative, our affect in different ways. So really ranging from qualitative survey-based research to documentary research, database-driven research, visualization, to that kind of creative experimental research.

JWR: One of the things Centers of Excellence are supposed to do is train this new generation of researchers and building that really collaborative space for humanities-based research that's collaborative and really using the many centuries, millennia of humanities knowledge about narrative to really throw light on these new digital technologies. I think that's going to be really exciting.

SR: Yeah, I think that's exciting and also important because when people think about the digital and they think about what sorts of education can you get in the digital? People tend to think, oh, computer science is the way that you go and you get a degree and you do research on computation. And of course, that's really important, that we have people who can engage with code, who can theorize new ways of writing computer programs. But if we lose our perspective on how it's effecting humans, on how we interact as a society, how we tell stories to each other and how it impacts the way that we think, we'd be losing a lot. So I think the fact that this is a humanities- and social science-driven research center that focuses on what I call the human function--

JWR: I'm still not quite sure about, Scott--

SR: --in computational creativity is very important.

JWR: Yeah, I think the humanities just has so much to offer, and the social sciences, and it's just really clear that we need that aspect. And so I'm really hoping this will help us really

build that next generation of scholars who have that knowledge and can actually apply our knowledge to the development and use of new technology in society.

SR: As well as hackers, of course.

JWR: Sure. So this is a research center. So we've also talked a bit about the relationship to teaching because we'll be working with PhD students, with postdocs, and with senior researchers, but we also have the teaching programs in digital culture, and Kristine and her colleagues at Infomedia have various programs there too.

SR: Yeah, and we're already planning on ways where we'll be integrating our research into the curriculum. Part of the reason we're doing a podcast is that there's going to be so many experts passing through town as a result of the center's activities, and we're going to harness that in integrating our students into the work of the center. We already have master's students who are working as research assistants. We already have interns coming in from other European countries, visiting PhD researchers. We're going to be doing a biannual PhD summer school that'll be both for our students and for other students from around the world. So, yeah, we said it in the grant, but I really think it's true that one of the main things that we're doing is training the next generation of digital narrative researchers, and that's going to be a big part of the legacy of the center.

JWR: So this is the first of a series of podcasts that you're going to be hosting. Could you say a little bit more about what you're looking at going forward in the podcast series?

SR: Yeah, essentially what I'm hoping to do is first start with the PIs of the center, with the principal investigators, who are all experts in different aspects of digital narrative. So I'll be talking with Kristine about transgressive games and about the Understanding Male Gamers project. I'll be talking with Nick Montfort about the history of text generation systems and maybe debate with him the merits of ChatGPT versus some of the systems that he's participated in authoring over the years. In that tradition, I'll be talking with Jason Nelson, who's one of our colleagues who uses computer games as a medium for digital poetry and for digital narrative. I'll be talking with Joseph Tabbi about the connections between electronic literature and traditions of the past, like the epic or lyric poetry. How do we compare and contrast these things? We'll also be talking about databases, about how we

build the infrastructure of a research field, which is something that we've all been deeply involved with. We'll be meeting a bunch of writers and digital artists over the course of this podcast, people like Rob Wittig, who developed Netprov, a new form of network-based improvisation where large groups of people write the equivalent of a novel together.

SR: So essentially we'll be doing that. And I also hope that we'll be responding to a lot of the issues that are coming up now, certainly we think of AI, but the next time an election comes around, we'll probably be talking about the ways that narratives are shaped there. Every day when I look at the newspaper now, there is a new story about digital culture, and in fact, there's probably a dozen new stories. So a lot of the research that we're doing right now is engaging with cultural impacts that we're feeling also right now, and we'll be trying to bring that to light. The other thing I'd say is that we're calling this podcast Off Center, and the reason for that is that I think we often encounter academics as sort of removed, off in some ivory tower, away from everyday life. And what I'm hoping is that we're going to be able to encounter researchers and artists working in this field as people and look at the sort of odd side of digital culture.

JWR: The odd side of digital culture?

SR: Yeah. The things that we normally don't think about or talk about in an academic environment. Things like funny memes, right? And how that's shaping our culture, but try to take a slightly different angle to the questions that we're addressing and to present it in a different way than we do in things like research papers or conferences. And that goes along with what we're trying to do at the center through things like exhibitions, where we're going to be trying to reach other kinds of audiences than you would if you were just publishing peer review journal articles.

JWR: And we'll have a newsletter in the show notes. I'm sure there'll be a link to the newsletter where people can keep up with all the different kinds of research and different products that are coming out of the center.

SR: I can't wait. All I've been doing so far is hiring people and navigating things through university bureaucracies. So the fact that we are hiring all these brilliant people-- I just had some interviews today with research technologists, one of whom will be working with the

center. But bringing that all together and having an administrative staff to handle some of these sides of it and to really focus on these fascinating questions and this research and creation that we're going to be doing for the next decade is tremendously exciting.

JWR: Yeah.

SR: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Jill, and I hope you'll come back some other time where we can focus more exclusively and directly on your research, like the fascinating machine vision project, the ERC project you're just wrapping up. And we'll be back next time with our next guest, Joseph Tabbi, at Off Center.

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