

## **INTERACTIVITY AND OPEN-ENDING (LITERARY WORKS)**

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### **Summary**

Interactivity and open-ending are two concepts which have gained popularity with the incursion of hypertext in the field of literary creation. However, their meaning is not unanimous as there is a multiplicity of coexisting definitions. This chapter organizes definitions in two poles, which mark two different approaches to the study of literature in the age of the new information technology: the technophile and the technosceptic or Luddite approach. From these two perspectives, different theories have evolved with respect to the meaning of interactivity and open-ending as applied to the analysis of digital and print literature. This text also addresses how digital literature has challenged important literary conventions which affect the role of the reader and the concept of narrativity, two pillars upon which the covenant between readers and writers had been traditionally based. Finally, it offers a discussion which elucidates some of the most important misunderstandings between technophiles and Luddites regarding those terms, and proposes a third view, the New Humanist perspective, which arrives at a consensus between both approaches to literature in the new information age.

### **1. Introduction**

The advent of information technologies has been one of the most important changes transforming the world of culture at a global level. This change has provoked the reorganization of the different media, which have found new forms of cohabitation in the global information space. In this new media ecology, new and old media and the artistic genres associated with them compete in order to obtain a relatively stable space from which to continue communicating with their readership or audience. In this new technological context, the concepts of interactivity and open-ending have become two of the touchstones around which the debate dealing with the particularities of digital literature and the advantage of the new medium over print has been forged. However, as we hear insistently about the growing interactivity that the media provide, a majority of

receivers have no open access to the truly enunciative spaces, only to the possible worlds under offer (see García Noblejas, 1996, p. 187). In this chapter we will trace the meaning of interactivity and open-endedness, two of the most salient features associated with digital literature, through the analysis of the contending definitions that cohabit in the global network, and we will evaluate if they are significantly contributing to increase the freedom of readers, and to open new spaces for literary communication.

## 2. Definitions

The word “interactivity” derives from the verb “interact” and the adjective “interactive”. Starting from the denotative (literal) meaning of “interactive” that one would find in a common dictionary, we see that the adjective “interactive” is used in two senses; a general one, which alludes to two entities acting reciprocally, influencing each other; and a specialized one, which is applied to a computer or other electronic device, and which refers to the capacity of a program to allow a two-way flow of information between it and a user, responding to the user’s input in a sort of dialogue.

It is not surprising that the adjective “interactive” has been among the most widely used decoys of the digital world. However, its popularity has been so great that it has made it transcend the computer science field to serve as an advertisement catchword for all sorts of products; from shampoos to cereal bars, from carpets for children to fridges. The term has been stretched so much that it has been practically emptied of its meaning.

With respect to the activities of reading and writing, the word “interactivity” has also been one of the terms most widely discussed by the academic community when digital literature made its appearance. But what do we actually mean when we use the word “interactivity”? As it happens with other concepts related to cyberculture, this term means different things for different groups of people and it is not easy to arrive at a consensus. Among a variety of uses, we can underscore three main definitions which provide a centre to most of the ideas and attitudes connected with the concept of interactivity observable on the Web. These definitions originate from three different ideological positions in relation to the role of technology in the literary creative process; a technophile position, a technosceptic or Luddite position, and what we can call a New Humanist position, which tries to establish a middle ground between both extremes.

The technophile position of some literary critics regarding the concept of interactivity is characteristic of the meaning attributed to it by computer scientists. For a programmer, interactivity is a concept which applies to the relation between human beings and machines. In particular it is used to describe those programs which allow the user, by means of an interface, to communicate with the computer in a fashion similar to a dialogue (since normally this interaction follows a question-answer structure). Examples of this sort of communication are provided by search engines, such as *Gloogle*, programs that allow the user to buy through Internet, translate a sentence, or perform a mathematical calculation. The term “interactive” is also applied to computer games in which one or several players compete against the machine and among each other.

This definition is used by some literary critics to refer to the new function acquired by the reader of hypertexts, who interacts with the digital text by means of the selection of links necessary to proceed with the reading activity.

From the opposite perspective characteristic of the technosceptics and Luddites, using the term “interactivity” to refer to human relations with machines adversely affects its quality. For them, “interactivity” only acquires its true meaning when it is applied to the contact between a minimum of two humans, a live conversation being the most interactive medium we possess. The machine can only offer a simulacrum of interactivity, in which there is no true information exchange. Therefore, any claim that reading hypertext is an inherently interactive experience is regarded with suspicion since moving from one lexia to the next by clicking a button is not considered synonymous with an increase in communication and collaboration between reader and text.

There is a third approach to the notion of “interactivity” which functions as a bridge between both extremes. The notion of “interactivity” has also emerged as a field of study dedicated to explore technology’s potential to serve as a link between humans (following the model human-machine-human). Such is the objective of the Stanford Interactivity Lab, where scientist and humanists cooperate to research the use of technology as a medium to improve human communications (<<http://www.interactivity.stanford.edu>>).

From this perspective, the truly interactive experiences that the digital world offers its users would be found in the chat rooms, MUDs, and all sorts of games in which several participants interact with each other. In these cases the digital medium is at the service of those who desire to communicate, providing them with a degree of interactivity close to the freshness of a conversation. Nevertheless, this third position does not consider the digital technology as inherently or automatically interactive, but it rather depends on the use humans make of it, that it becomes so.

From this approach emerges a useful understanding of interactivity, a concept which describes the relationship established between two poles, the technological and the human one, a quality midway between a property of the medium and a process undertaken by the user. It is also useful to consider this quality as measurable. There can be different degrees of interactivity, depending on the characteristics of the technology used as much as on the attitude and competence of the user to exploit the interactivity options available. According to this, different technologies permit different degrees of interactivity; however, the degree of interactivity obtained through them also depends on the capacity of the user and his or her degree of familiarization with the technology.

Interactivity can also be broken down into various components, such as the possibilities the technology offers for the exchange of information, the degree of control the user has over the interaction, the capacity for collaboration in the creative process, or the adaptivity of the technology to the time and location of the user. In the field of artistic creation, for example, drama would be a more interactive medium than cinema, since during a performance players can respond to the attitude of the audience in several ways, changing the text, shortening it or even interrupting the play. The audience, in its turn, can show its degree of enthusiasm or displeasure with great immediacy. Therefore, the medium used to transmit a message affects the degree of interactivity that can be obtained, in the same way that the user’s training and creativity has the power to transform the same experience into an activity more or less interactive.

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### Biographical Sketch

**María Goicoechea** was born in Santander, Spain, the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, 1971. She studied English Philology at the University Complutense of Madrid. She has studied at the University of East Anglia (UEA), UK, and at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), USA, where she obtained a Master's Degree in Intercultural Communication. Her doctoral dissertation is entitled *The Reader in Cyberspace: A Literary Ethnography of Cyberculture* (2004). Her research interests include literary theory, ethnography, and cyberculture. Currently, she is a teacher of the English Department at the University Complutense of Madrid (UCM). She also teaches Mediterranean Literature and Cinema at American University (AU) in Madrid. Prof. Goicoechea is a member of LEETHI Research Group (UCM), and of HERMENEIA (Open University of Catalonia, UOC), two interdisciplinary research groups dedicated to the study of literature and computers.