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Playing the Text, Performing the Future

Narrating Futures

Edited by
Christoph Bode

Volume 2

Felicitas Meifert-Menhard

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Future Narratives in Print and Digiture

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1 Introduction: Narrating the Future in Text

In his novel *Hortense is Abducted* (1989; published in the French original as *L'Enlèvement d'Hortense* in 1987), Jacques Roubaud sketches the design for a book that comes into being through the choices of its readers, a book created through individual selections from a multitude of possible options:

I would have liked very much to explore certain of these parallel fictional universes, and I had proposed to my Publisher, in spite of the enormous amount of additional work it would have imposed on me, to furnish him with an absolute forest of multiple diverging and reconverging tales, with approved spatio-temporal travel maps, and a guide provided for the tourists of the fiction. The same unchangeable book would not have been stupidly printed for everyone but, rediscovering good old thirteenth-century customs (it was only yesterday), during the age of manuscripts, each reader would have his *own personalized book*. The book would not be available in stores. Or rather, in good bookstores, you would have had the chance to choose: either in the standard edition, everybody's book [...] or else you would have placed an order for *your* edition, chosen according to a 'menu' of possible for kings in the course of the tale. This copy *would not yet have been printed*. By pressing here and there on a keyboard, the bookstore clerk would have transmitted to the computer-printer the specifications of the novel chosen by the customer and at once, thanks to modern typesetting/composition processes, vroom, vroom, the book would be on its way, and it would arrive in no time. (75–76)

This custom-made text, emerging from personal choice rather than authorial command, allows room for what traditional storytelling cancels out: the offering of diverse alternatives budding from one narrative stem, selected according to the reader's own preferences. The essential features of these "multiple diverging and reconverging tales" – structural variation, multiplicity, choice, bifurcation, and emergence – are features that characterize a mode of narration which steers away from condensing multiple options into one coherent storyline and toward the staging, indeed flaunting, of not-yet-realized options as potential continuations of a given situation. Roubaud describes, in other words, the quintessential future narrative.

Telling the future *as* the future is what differentiates the category of future narratives from traditional, i.e. 'past' narratives, which may tell the reader something *about* the future if they are utopias, tales of time travel, or science fiction, but do so from a retrospective point of view.¹ In other words, the intrinsic

¹ In this context, Ryan rightly argues that "[s]etting events in what is from our historical point of view the future does not necessarily result in a prospective narrative [...]" (*Avatars* 15). That is, the thematic exploration of future states, occurrences, or time periods does not make a text into a future narrative, as the narrative mode of such texts is typically the past or present tense, and these texts do not offer structural multiplicity.

openness of situations and essential unknowability of events yet to come may be reflected thematically in past narratives (PNs), but they are not *performed* in these texts, as they report events that have already happened at the point of their telling. Future narratives (FNs), on the other hand, do not (necessarily) consider the future as a topic; they do, however, structurally stage the future as a space of possibility. This is achieved by presenting at least one situation within the storyline (I will shortly specify what exactly this ‘situation’ entails) from whence a progression in two or more different directions is possible. To offer a more formalized definition: FNs can be defined as containing at least one *nodal situation* (or *node*, in short) that allows for more than one continuation.² Regarding the corpus of text-based FNs examined in the present study, this nodal situation can include, among other things, a directive to choose between two options in a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure (CYOA) gamebook (‘If you want to fight the dragon, go to page x’ versus ‘If you want to return home, go to page y’), the presence of links in a hypertextual narrative, or the offering of unbound text segments to be shuffled at will (in B.S. Johnson’s loose-chapter novel *The Unfortunates*, for instance) – in sum, any condition that enables multiple possibilities of continuing a narrative.³ Indeed, it does not even necessarily have to be the reader who decides between the individual continuations: some FNs leave the choice to a character within the story, or, indeed, to the text itself (a prime example is Stuart Moulthrop’s hyperfiction *Hegirascope*, where the electronic system automatically selects a link if the reader fails to do so within 30 seconds). The crucial point to make is that the node is the smallest unit of any FN, no matter into which medium that FN is inscribed, no matter whether we call it fiction or non-fiction, and no matter which subject it thematically revolves around. In their formal privileging of openness, FNs can be understood as the diametrical opposite of traditional notions of plot as “an integrating dynamism that draws a unified and complete story from a variety of incidents, [...] that transforms this variety into a unified and complete story.” (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 8)⁴ In FNs, this unified story is split open into a stratified variety of options. Whereas in traditional fiction, all possibilities merge into one consistent story line, in future narratives, the story line spreads into multiple continuations, into not-yet-realized possibilities. The central structural movement of these texts is thus *branching out* rather than *closing in*; the emphasis is centred on the potential of a situation to generate diverse outcomes.

² This concept of the node will be further described in Chapter 3.

³ A more detailed survey of nodal situations in textual FNs is provided in Chapter 3.7.

⁴ Also see Morson (*Narrative and Freedom* 20) on this point: “Lives include all sorts of extraneous details leading nowhere, but good stories do not.”

A word on the term ‘narrative’ seems to be in order here, since the research project *Narrating Futures* (NAFU) has identified a new narrative genre (which does not mean that FNs *themselves* have not been around for a long time – they have –, only that they have never been systematically categorized as a separate genre). A much debated concept, narrative is an intensely ‘productive’ term as it persistently encourages and generates new definitions and conceptualizations: it has been identified as the basis of human thought (H. Porter Abbott), as spanning across genres, media, and societies (Roland Barthes), as the means by which we coordinate and understand our temporal existence (Paul Ricœur), and as the cognitive creation of a world that must contain a temporal dimension and allow interpretative activity (Marie-Laure Ryan), to name only a few approaches. From broadly essentialist views like Abbott’s to more concrete definitions like Ryan’s, narrative seems to be, at one and the same time, ubiquitous and difficult to capture. Adding another definition to this canon may initially appear to only raise another voice in the polyvocal meta-narrative *on* narrative; however, it is unavoidable to classify what exactly we mean when we talk about narrative before introducing a whole new class of narratives (that is, *future* narratives) which both play and change the game of storytelling in significant ways. For this purpose, it may be helpful to look at the other side of the narrative coin and realize that while nothing is intrinsically narrative, anything can be *read as* narrative by a perceiving agent. Narrative can be classified as the mental and/or linguistic linking of any two events, but ultimately, it always depends on a human consciousness to provide this linkage. This is what Abbott has classified as ‘narrative perception’: narrative is “virtually built in to the way we see” (6), and while we must not necessarily ‘see’ narrative anywhere, narrative lurks everywhere as possibility, a potential waiting to be activated. Indeed, our propensity to link *any* two events – as disparate as they may first appear – to form a narrative is deeply inscribed into our identity as human beings, because

[...] we are absolutely hooked on narratives. We see them wherever we can, we respond to the slightest suggestion (like a patient in a Rorschach test, who is shown an abstract ink blot and is asked to interpret what he sees). We do what our software allows us, indeed forces us to do: we seek possible links, patterns, connections, *Gestalten*: we seek meaning. (Bode, *Future Narratives* 1.2)⁵

With this in mind, it becomes clear that FNs, as described above, *are* indeed narratives: though their characteristic trait is the implementation of nodes, they are, of course, not devoid of events – and these events can be linked, through the

5 All references to the other volumes of the *Narrating Futures* series will be provided in the form of section numbers instead of page numbers.

negotiation of nodes, to create different sequences (i.e., different stories). Indeed, FNs exemplify the nature of narrative as *potential* to a radically heightened degree, as they literally present possibility by replacing uni-linear definitude with optionality ('things can go this way, or that way, or...'). Nobody *must* engage with the nodal structure of a FN and select options for continuation – in this case, the narrative remains unactualized –, but as soon as the reader accepts the text's invitation to play with different possibilities and paths, she will inevitably create a narrative experience, irrespective of the medial context the nodes are situated in (text, film, or video games, to name only a few). The structural 'openness' of FNs thus does not prevent the generation of narrative, but, on the contrary, may entice us to perform connective acts even more forcefully than a conventional uni-linear novel.

The view of narrative proposed here – which is, of course, heavily informed by cognitive narratology (cf. Herman; Jahn) – also helps to understand the diversity of the corpus presented in this study of textual FNs. Grouping such radically different phenomena as the print novel, electronic fiction (combined under the heading of 'digiture,' a neologism coined to capture not just hypertext fiction, but also all other types of digital narrative, including interactive fiction, the visual novel, and more) and the alternate reality game (ARG) under the heading of *future narrative* may be difficult to fathom for even the most open-minded reader expecting a narratological evaluation of a new type of storytelling. Are these really all narratives, and are they interrelated enough to be pooled in a survey of any kind? The answer to these questions is a definitive yes – and for (at least) two reasons: firstly, it should have become clear by now that our definition of narrative as *any two events that can be cognitively and/or linguistically linked* is an umbrella wide enough to accommodate even such comparatively ephemeral and disparate processes as the ARG (here, too, events are linked by a group of players to create a collaborative, multimedial narrative of problem-solving). Expanding the concept of narrative this far is not an arbitrary move to include as much material as possible, but, on the contrary, serves as impressive evidence of the universality of storytelling – again, keeping in mind that nothing is narrative intrinsically, but anything *can be* narrative if there is a perceiving agent who is willing to perform the act of meaningful linkage. Secondly, all artefacts treated in this study have in common as a basis their reliance on the presentation and generation of *text* in a narrow sense of the word (text as written material that can be preserved in some way). This reliance on text excludes, for example, oral storytelling, which undeniably generates narrative, but not 'text' in this more restrictive sense (unless, of course, someone writes the oral narrative down – but then all we are left with is a PN). It also serves to draw boundaries to the large (and, in many ways, interrelated) field of computer gaming (obviously, computer games can also tell stories, but their

presentation is not based on written text, nor do they necessarily create such text) and film (the same argument applies here). The category of *textual future narratives* considered in this part of the *Narrating Futures*-series thus encompasses all forms of narrative which operate with written text as their primary means of communication. The variety of media included in this approach – from the hard-copy book to the computer and mobile platforms such as the iPhone or iPad – testifies to the fact that textual FNs are literally ubiquitous within the narrative cosmos, testing the limits of bound pages in print novels, gaining full force in the electronic realm, and expanding into unprecedented forms in multiuser digitality, with thousands of players creating ever new textual artefacts on- and offline. FNs are everywhere, and they raise a multitude of questions about the relation between time and narrative, about the necessity of closure and structure, and about the relationship between narrative and life. These questions stand at the heart of this book, which examines future narratives in text from a structural point of view and provides a comprehensive overview of the many different implementations of this new genre in the fields of print, digitality, and collaborative storytelling.

The evaluation of how the future can be staged as truly ‘open’ in text must begin with a closer look at the difference between what Morson has termed “the difference between the shape of narrative and the shape of experience” (*Narrative and Freedom* 38) – that is, between the conceptualization of narrative as an aesthetic product and the view of (real-life) experience as an ongoing process. How can a narrative text, in other words, preserve the characteristic features of the future – its openness, undecidability, unpredictability – while remaining an aesthetic artefact that has hitherto been closely associated with sequentiality and retrospectivity? This question will be dealt with at length in Chapter 2, which looks both at the future as a temporal phenomenon and at the possibilities of reconciling this phenomenon with existing definitions of narrative. This chapter closes with the contextualization of FNs within previous attempts to classify temporally open, multipath, choice-determined texts. In particular, Hilary Dannenberg, Espen J. Aarseth, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Janet Murray have provided valuable and ground-breaking insights into the nature of texts that stage multiple possibilities, offer different reading paths, and engage the reader through decision situations and interactivity. Much of this study is indebted to their work, which has paved the way for considering the structural specificities of FNs as a variant of multi-linear narration, and provides important analytical concepts such as ergodics, interactivity, agency, and immersion that play a crucial role in the assessment of future narratives’ potential to create participatory reading experiences.

Chapter 3 begins with a second look at the relationship between narrative, retrospectivity, and the structural openness of FNs, this time under a more explicitly

media-specific perspective. In how far is the structural implementation of openness compromised by the physicality of the bound book? What changes when we switch media and look at electronic textuality? Which textual medium allows for the highest degree of consequence within choice situations? How, in short, can structural openness be implemented in different textual media, and to what effect? The issue of medium-sensitivity, of utmost importance to FNs as a genre that comprises such varied forms of storytelling as print literature, hyperfiction, films, and computer games, surfaces recurrently in the present study, which itself features many different variants of text-based storytelling forms that must always be regarded in light of the medium they are inscribed into. Chapter 3 then moves on to provide the structural backbone for the analysis of FNs as a textual phenomenon; the basic element of any future narrative – the node – is examined as a constituent of print, digital, and performative-collaborative modes of storytelling. As has already been clarified earlier, any narrative that counts as a FN must contain at least one node that allows for multiple continuations of a given narrative strand, and such nodes can be of a very different nature in the different media analysed within the scope of this book. How nodes are functionalized in textual FNs, and how the reader is made aware of them and enabled by them to become an active shaper of the storyworld, constitutes the focus of the discussion of the node; of equal importance is the question of how nodes can be connected structurally in text, and how these different structures (the arborescent, or tree structure; the network structure; the axial structure) affect reader navigation and the weight of consequence effected by individual choices.

Chapter 4, finally, provides a comprehensive typology of how the future can be narrated in text, beginning with texts that are *not yet* future narratives, but approach the genre either thematically or formally – such as novels dealing with chance and/or randomness, or novels featuring an ending that is left open, undecided, and on which the reader can speculate in the manner of cognitively creating continuations. Multi-linearity is then formally introduced by way of forking-path texts and the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure genre; these are early printed attempts at effectuating structural openness in the print medium, and, indeed, early examples of FNs in text. Novels structured after specific games (card games, for instance, or combinatorial texts) also involve the reader as player in the creation of narrative content; the examination of printed texts as FNs closes with the multimodal novel, in which the reader is called upon to navigate between different (visual, verbal, graphical) semiotic modes. The switch over to the field of digital narration is a significant one in many respects: as the consideration of various forms of electronic storytelling will show, the ease with which future narration is possible increases considerably when narrative happens digitally, as the node constitutes the central structural element of any electronic text. Forms

such as interactive fiction, hyperfiction, and the visual novel implement formal openness by linking story material which the reader can only access gradually by engaging with the continuation-by-choice format of these texts. Digital narratives are thus structurally more apt to create interactive, multi-linear reading experiences, but one considerable shortcoming that surfaces especially in hyperfiction is that these interactive experiences often do not effect *meaningful* choices on the part of the reader, who can choose where to go in the text with the utmost degree of freedom, but may never feel that her decisions matter for the story-world. Again, the issue of consequence surfaces as one of the most important aspects of FNs as a whole, and it is one that proves particularly problematic in digital text forms. The typology of future narratives closes by straining against the boundaries of textuality, evaluating collaborative and performative modes of storytelling such as the pen-and-paper roleplaying game and the alternate reality game in their roles as generating emergent, feedback-determined, and genuinely open stories. Individual readings of paradigmatic textual FNs constitute the last part of this study; from thematic explorations of choice and chance to Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books and forking-path novels, digital hyperfictions, and interactive fiction, these readings show how the future can be told in different media, different genres, and with different degrees of radicality.

The aim of the present study is thus twofold: first, to assess and situate textual FNs as a novel genre of storytelling within the context of existing narratological conceptualizations; and second, to provide specific examples for this newly identified genre wherever possible. The fact that some text forms – such as the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure book or hypertext fiction – are examined in more detail than others results from the circumstance that these variants prove especially pertinent to the staging of possibility and multiple continuations; for reasons that will be expounded throughout this book, not all forms of textuality are able to functionalize structural openness to equally successful degrees, or have done so with equal prevalence. The fact that I take into consideration ‘simple’ children’s books – the CYOA series was popular in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and mainly targeted to children between the ages of 10 and 14 – as well as aesthetically dense and convoluted hyperfictions such as the work of Michael Joyce or Stuart Moulthrop testifies to the interest of this study in FNs as a *structural phenomenon*; I do not weigh these genres against each other by their ‘literary value’ as aesthetic artefacts, nor am I primarily interested in aspects such as semantic complexity or interpretative potential. The main focus of reading these (and other) text forms as FNs lies on how they employ nodes and realize choice situations, and how reader navigation is influenced by individual nodal structures and the issue of consequence which results from these structures. The enabling of possibility rather than the providing of closure is what makes

FNs unique, and the ways in which they enable this possibility proves to be the central question in a comprehensive analysis of the genre.

Before this analysis can begin, a note on the terminology used to characterize the ‘recipient’ of a future narrative: so far in this introduction, she has been referred to as a ‘reader’, but even a brief glance at the spectrum of texts covered in this book reveals that this term does not manage to map all possible roles that she may take on within the corpus of textual FNs. Is the recipient of an interactive fiction, for example, really ‘only’ a reader? Or does she, in her engagement with the game’s parser, turn into a player of sorts? And what about printed gamebooks? Can one merely read a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure tale, or does one have to play it to some extent? The insufficiency of the term ‘reader’ becomes most apparent in collaborative, performative forms of storytelling such as the alternate reality game, where participants must take on the role of reader, player, even writer, all at once. To designate the position of the recipient of a FN somewhere on the gradient between reading and playing – future narratives can, in fact, seldom *only* be read, since they most often effect at least a minimal degree of navigating between nodes and making decisions on how to continue –, the term ‘reader/player’ is introduced. This conjoined idiom acknowledges the hybrid mechanism effectuated by textual FNs, though ‘reader’ and ‘player’ are also used separately whenever one of the two roles dominate (the former in print fiction, for instance; the latter in more openly ludic forms such as interactive fiction or alternate reality gaming). Occasionally, the reader/player is also identified as a ‘user’ in digital forms of storytelling, but it should always be clear that the dominant mode of reception is that of fused reading and playing. It is one of the most striking characteristics of FNs that they tease the recipient out of her complacent role of reading for the plot (or, even more specifically, reading for the end), and compel her to actively engage herself with the structural possibilities of the text. The role of the reader as player will again be focused upon in Chapter 3, but this preliminary identification of her double status already anticipates the double nature of FNs as text *and* game.

The implementation of choice and openness in text is an idea that, for surprisingly many reasons, takes some getting used to – though, as readers of literature, we have been trained to follow multiple plot lines, assess our identification with individual characters, and even accept narrative disturbances such as unreliable narrators or metafictional illusion breaking, we are not easily prepared to decide how a text should continue when it offers us several possibilities. This offering of possibility turns the spotlight away from the fictional world and onto *us*, and we suddenly find ourselves being granted constitutive power over story development, something that we usually think is reserved for the author of a tale. While participatory engagement with a storyline has become habitual, even addictively

enticing, in the world of computer gaming, the world of text has hitherto been regarded as one in which we can wander, possibly even lose ourselves, but which we are usually unable to directly affect. The power and fascination of FNs lies in exactly their function as mechanisms of enablement, and with this function, they constitute a truly new way of looking at what storytelling can allow us to do. How this new direction of textuality can be reconciled with previous conceptualizations of narrative shall open the discussion of FNs as a genre in the next chapter.

2 The Tellability of the Future

The term ‘future narrative’ combines two words that are loaded with conceptual connotations and have sparked an enormous amount of definitory multiplicity; the latter has already been tackled in the introduction of this study, where it has been described as the mental and/or linguistic linking of any two (or more) events by a human agent. This view of narrative can be seen to include both past and future storytelling; however, what remains to be evaluated is the tension that arises between what Ryan calls “standard written literary fiction based on the illocutionary act of ‘telling somebody that something happened’” (*Avatars* 97) – what is, in other words, understood as narrative or retrospective storytelling in the traditional sense – and the staging of possibility that FNs perform structurally, through the inclusion of nodes. The *material* hindrances that the print medium encounters when attempts are made to break through sequentiality and replace it with multi-linearity are evaluated in Chapter 3; the more obviously theoretical issues inherent in trying to reconcile narrative and structural openness will be the focus of what follows here. The first part of the term ‘future narrative’, too, deserves more detailed attention as a historical phenomenon and theoretical concept; the classification of a FN as any narrative that allows for more than one continuation elevates the issue of futurity and the openness of temporal developments from a merely thematic aspect to an integral part of the textual structure. The (generally somewhat vague) term ‘openness’ here specifically refers to the fact that the text is not bound to one single version of the narrated events, but can unfold and present multiple versions of these events, any node providing the possibility to take at least two different routes through the story. How the fictional universe will be encountered and traversed depends on the decisions of an agent negotiating the nodal situation(s) and is thus genuinely ‘open’, i.e. not yet decided, at the beginning of the reading or playing process – exactly in the same sense in which the future is routinely conceived of as open and undecided from the standpoint of the present. After outlining the shape of the future, this chapter closes by embedding FNs within a broader context of theories that deal with mechanisms informing this newly identified genre, including Aarseth’s influential concept of ergodic literature, which bears some important similarities to our conceptualization of FNs, as well as the more reader-oriented notions of agency and immersion that Murray has identified as viable elements of interactive storytelling. While none of these approaches is able individually to cover the full theoretical scope of future narration, each fruitfully contributes to a deeper understanding of this newly identified genre, which itself can be seen as uniting and referring to many different conceptual mechanisms dealing with temporality, structural multiplicity, and reader (inter-)activity.

2.1 The Shape of Narrative – The Shape of Experience

Structurally simulating the undecidedness of future occurrences within a narrative text seems, at first glance, to be an impossibility by definition. Ryan points us to this ostensible impossibility when she constitutes that “life is lived looking forward, but it is told looking backward” (*Avatars* 78), and it is this aspect of retrospection which is regularly postulated to be inherent, even essential, to any narrative representation in traditional classifications of the term.⁶ When H. Porter Abbott defines narrative as “*the representation of events or a series of events*” (13), the fact that these events must be past at the time of telling is signalled by the very word representation: this is, literally, the presentation of something that has already happened. Narrative, to Abbott and many other theorists of the genre, is the ‘emplotting’ (to borrow Hayden White’s term) of single events into a meaningful temporal sequence; it is “*the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time.*” (3) Such a retrospective organizational principle, fundamental to who we are as human beings, is arguably at odds with notions of presentness, and, even more strongly, with futurity in storytelling. Abbott, in fact, explicitly addresses this claim when he contrasts narrative with events taking place in the present and asks: “If things are happening right now for the first time, do we call it narrative? Do we refer to our lives, for example, as narratives?” (35) Not surprisingly, considering Abbott’s definition of narrative as representation quoted above, his answer must be ‘no’: life does not qualify as narrative because “there is no pre-existing story” (36) – nothing, in short, to be represented. Currie makes a similar argument about the discrepancy between narrative and the future when he observes that “[t]he unreality of the future, its openness, contrasts with the already-there-ness of the future on the reel of a film, and by extension with the already-there-ness of the future in writing [...]” (19). This sense of an *already-there-ness* appears to intrinsically prevent the development of new (and potentially unexpected) situations and events in narrative fiction, as everything has unalterably set and congealed before we even come into contact with a narrative text for the first time – even if this texts tries to feign simultaneity by using the present (or even future) tense.⁷ Narrative, in conventional concep-

⁶ Ryan further observes: “While the laws of material causality operate forward, the laws of narrative, artistic, textual, or more generally of communicative causality operate overwhelmingly backward.” (*ibid.*) Bode argues that “in narratives coincidences are retrospectively transformed into a chain of causes and effects” (*The Novel* 16) and terms this ‘narrative necessity’ (cf. 27).

⁷ Again, see Ryan (*Avatars* 79): “Because of the dualism author/narrator, present-tense fiction is really a disguised form of retrospective narration.” According to Ryan, the closest approach of traditional narrative mechanisms to an effect of true simultaneity happens in the form of “live broadcasts, particularly radio broadcasts of sports events. [...] A live broadcast may be compared

tions of the term, presupposes *already-there-ness*, can only depict that which has come before – even if, as Abbott also acknowledges, “the story only comes to life when it is narrativized” (20); when there is, in other words, discourse.

Narrative is therefore generally seen to privilege solidified closure over the display of emergent possibility, as it “lacks the ‘feature’ of allowing modifications to [...] stories.” (Frasca 211) This standpoint also implies that, as the quotation from Abbott above has already demonstrated, narrative diverges sharply from life itself, because “[c]losure and structure belong to the author and testify to the artefact. They mark the difference between [...] the product of narrative art and the process of living.” (Morson, *Narrative and Freedom* 38) One of the most defining criteria of real-life existence, namely, that we can never fully know what the future will hold, is thus discarded in conventional storytelling for the sake of coherence and unity: the aesthetic artefact is a finished product, not a process (and this applies most strongly to the quintessential narrative genre: the printed novel).⁸ Exactly this difference between product and process, however, is what marks the distinction between PNs and FNs, as FNs do not *represent* a *product*, but allow an agent (the reader, or an in-text character) to *activate* a *process* – the process of negotiating nodal situations, that is. FNs centre on a notion of structural potentiality that seems to be lost in traditional narratives; they preserve what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed ‘eventness’, or “that moment of Being which is constituted by the transitiveness and open eventness of Being.” (*Philosophy* 1) Admittedly, Bakhtin’s concept of eventness as the potentiality of any given moment in life to generate something genuinely new goes far beyond the scope of nodal situations, as his concept characterizes an intrinsic quality of ‘now’ in general and not a quality of (future) narratives in particular; nonethe-

to a computer program operating in ‘real time’ [...]” (*ibid.*). Here, the shape of narrative is nearly identical to the shape of experience, and “the delay between the time of occurrence of the narrated events and the time of their verbal representation strives toward zero [...]” (*ibid.*). The commentator must be able to spontaneously react to emerging situations, of which she has no prior knowledge (aside from being familiar with the rules of the game and its general progression – start, duration, rounds etc.), and she has very little or no time to narratively encode her observations into a retrospectively arranged sequence – she must tell the game as she witnesses it. Plotting and teleology thus yield to spontaneous commentary and a sense of immediacy of narration. Also cf. *Narrating Futures* Vol. 1, section 1.2.

8 This is not to discount the experience, of course, of not knowing what will happen in a novel until one has read it from beginning to end – this mechanism of suspense-creation is inherent to almost any encounter with narrative fiction. However, what is of interest here is the novel as a *materially* ‘finished’ object in the sense that it contains a completed story that is unaffected by the reading process as such (and this is where FNs differ significantly).

less, Morson's characterization of eventness reads strikingly similar to how we conceptualize a FN:

For there to be eventness, there must be alternatives. Eventful events are performed in a world in which there are multiple possibilities, in which some things that could happen do not. In such a world, time ramifies and its possibilities multiply; each realized possibility opens new choices while precluding others that once could have been made. (*Narrative and Freedom* 22)

This is a near to perfect synopsis of FNs that generate possibility through formal multi-linearity. The paradox that arises here is that future narratives, within the context of Bakhtinian eventness, would not be ascribed to the realm of aesthetic artefacts, because such artefacts are precisely *not*, according to Bakhtin, able to adequately emulate eventness: they are “powerless to take possession of that moment of Being” and thus “the product of aesthetic activity is not, with respect to its meaning, actual Being in process of becoming [...]” (*Philosophy* 1). Eventness, for Bakhtin, is something which is reserved for life, not art, and so FNs would have to be counted as belonging to the former category, not the latter; in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, he famously differentiates between “the world of culture and the world of life” (2), where the first (“the world in which the acts of our activity are objectified”) could be taken to include (past) narrative, while the second (“the world in which these acts actually proceed and are actually accomplished once and only once”) refers to the openness of every day existence – and, we could postulate, to the openness of future narratives, which permit different runs of one nodal structure.⁹ FNs as narratives which no longer attempt to separate themselves from life as a continually developing process, but which try to simulate precisely this process by constituting an emergent performance rather than a closed representation, present the shape of our human temporal experience as it unfolds from ‘the now’, and their ‘aesthetic activity’ literally *happens* during the reading or playing process: they harbour eventness to a degree unprecedented in storytelling. Morson has critically remarked that, by superimposing a narrative structure onto individual events, “[t]he very possibility of possibility is ultimately eliminated. Whenever structure is present, there is no truly eventful process, only the execution of a pre-given plan” (*Narrative and Freedom* 39), but it is exactly this ‘truly eventful process’ that FNs simulate – their nodal, multipath structure contains a dynamic set of possibilities that depends on individual performances for concrete realizations of the narrative. This has decisive implications for the overall reading experience of such a text: telling the future *as* the

⁹ This concept of ‘runs’ is further described in Chapter 3.3.

future means subverting traditional storytelling structures and disrupting the reader's expectations for coherence and linearity. The text invites play instead of offering the results of a finished game.

FNs thus actively stage the process of a series of events evolving and developing into different directions (according to the decisions made at individual nodes). This process is, by definition, neither determined nor closed from its outset, as the multiple continuations in FNs work against, indeed often resist, sealed and rigid structures or the establishment of definitive ending points. Being procedural systems, FNs present storytelling as an on-going and versatile development that only becomes a 'product' in retrospect – after one specific path of the narrative has been read, played, or watched (and this 'product', will, of course, only be one of at least two possibilities the text offers). FNs thus attempt to simulate the process of becoming. Indeed, the notion of process very strongly relates to the idea of simulation, since simulation usually entails a dynamic process by which the development of a given scenario under a (more or less definitely specified) set of conditions is explored. What is emphasized in the simulative mode is that which has not yet happened but which is, in principle, possible or at least imaginable. "In temporal terms", Frasca has observed, "narrative is about what already happened while simulation is about what could happen." ("Videogames" 86) Simulation, in other words, is the exploration of one or more possible outcomes resulting from determined premises. Elsewhere, Frasca regards "simulations as dynamic systems that produce outcomes" ("Simulation versus Representation"), a definition that rather closely mirrors the understanding of FNs as presented in this study, as these texts simulate openness and processuality through branching and/or choice making on the part of the reader, her interaction with a given environment, the act of decision making, and gameplay.^{10,11} FNs are, then, a kind of 'simulation narrative' (cf. Murray, *Hamlet* 181): they differ from conventional past – that is, chronological and uni-linear – narratives in their integration of

10 There is, of course, always the possibility that a simulation produces only one outcome; Frasca's statement should perhaps be modified to classify simulations as systems that produce *varying numbers of unknown* outcomes. For a critical evaluation of this definition, cf. *Narrating Futures* Vol. 1, 1.14.

11 Also see Ryan (*Avatars* 13), who differentiates between representational and simulative modes of narration: "This distinction is based on the idea that a given process may be actualized in many different ways, or that a given action may have many different consequences depending on the global state of the world. A representation is an image of one of these possibilities, while a simulation is a productive engine that generates many different courses of events through a combination of fixed and variable parameters." Bode, in *Narrating Futures* Vol.1, takes issue with this characterization of a simulation as a 'productive engine' and asks: "A simulation is not *really* a machine, is it? But if it isn't, what is it?" (1.14).

simulative mechanisms into the overall narrative structure. While PNs can be considered as purely representational works of art (again, as presentations of what happened told ‘after the fact’), FNs consist – to differing degrees – of both simulation *and* representation. Simulation is associated with the performative, process-driven playing out of different options within the experience of reading or playing a FN. While it is impossible to preserve openness in a purely narrative representation of a decision making process (for instance, a character musing on different ways her life *could* have gone) because, again, this representation means that the decisions have already happened at the point of their telling, *simulating* the selection of options not only makes such openness possible, but functionalizes the undecidedness of outcomes as the very precondition for the simulation. A group of texts considered in the scope of the present study that relies especially strongly on simulation are alternate reality games that simulate real-life problems and work towards a collaborative solution finding process. Indeed, these games are taken by some to be valuable tools in playing out the future before it happens, helping to map and create a better future by making use of “exploratory play” (Varney).¹² More generally, all FNs simulate decision-making processes by prompting an agent (the reader, or a character within the text) to involve herself in a nodal situation where she must choose between alternatives for continuation. Depending on the ‘radicality’ of a FN, the simulative aspect is more or less pronounced within the text. Proportionally to the measure in which simulation increases in importance and functionality, the importance of representation decreases. Simulation thereby becomes the determining principle in electronic textuality and alternate reality games, while in print FNs, the representational aspect usually outweighs simulative mechanisms: here, narrative is so materially bound that the staging of openness is counterweighed by the static physicality of the book (more on this in Chapter 3). All FNs, nonetheless, rely on mechanisms of simulation to some degree; in this genre, simulation comes into contact with the process of narration in a unique way, since nodes enable simulative processes. The combination of these two elements can be seen as a unique feature of FNs and one that clearly distinguishes this group of texts from traditional past storytelling.¹³ FNs allow the playing-through of options in a fictional space, the testing

¹² These games are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.6.3.

¹³ Interestingly, Ryan has linked simulative mechanisms to counterfactuality or the question of ‘what would happen under circumstances *x* or *y*’: “Simulation theory can [...] be described as a form of counterfactual reasoning by which the subject places himself in another person’s mind: ‘If I were such and such, and if I held beliefs *p* and *q*, I would do *x* and *y*.’” (*Virtual Reality* 111) This type of ‘mental simulation’ is read by Ryan as a “special type of imagining: placing oneself in a concrete imaginary situation, living its evolution moment by moment, trying to anticipate possible developments, experiencing the disappearance of possibilities that comes with