

Literary Virtual Games: Magical Portals within Fiction

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Abstract:

*The book has always been seen as a portal to a different world, a fictional world which entertains and teaches. Readers have forever wished to be a part of their favourite books and have wished to converse with their favourite characters. These desires have led to a genre of fiction which not only talks about books but portrays texts that are alive, texts which the reader can enter and even change. This paper looks at three such texts, *Inkheart* (2003), *The Eyre Affair* (2001) and *Sophie's World* (1991), to see how these texts within texts work. In the process we hope to find answers to questions like: what kind of power do these readers have so as to enter a literary text; do these texts have specific rules concerning time and space; and how do these texts depict conflict between authors and readers? The paper will also examine how this genre portrays the convergence of fiction and games as these texts reflect a literary virtual game.*

Key words: literary virtual games, *Inkheart* (2003), *The Eyre Affair* (2001), *Sophie's World* (1991)

With the advent of writing, words were thought to be magical. They are denoted with supreme power to heal and to ward off evil energies. This magic of words has returned with the rise of a genre yet to be completely identified but still discernible in

contemporary fiction. These books have been identified as metafiction but this term itself has become a sort of umbrella term and thus, the examples for metafiction comprise of books as varied from each other as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Jean Rhys Wide's *Sargasso Sea*, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Doug Dorst's *S* and the list can go on. This genre has been steadily accumulating books through ages and the experiments within it are becoming more complex. This arena contains, like we said before, books that are experimenting with the magic of words. These books are just not talking about fiction but show words as portals that can carry their readers in different worlds. The metaphor of book being a portal to different worlds has been brought alive in these books. We would discuss three books belonging to this genre, *The Eyre Affair* by Jasper Fforde, *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke and *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder, published in 2001, 2003 and 1991 respectively. But rather than just comparing the experiments in these books, we would like to see how these experiments lead to a world very similar to online virtual world. By doing so we hope to understand what emotions do these books want to portray and we would also like to highlight some of the metaphors of reading that we encounter.

The Eyre Affair is the first book in the series *Thursday Next*, the protagonist of the same name being a literary detective in a parallel world which revolves around books and authors. This book follows her adventures as she traces down Hades, a supervillain with many mysterious powers. It is told that Thursday with a help of another reader has visited *Jane Eyre* as a child. This reader, Mrs. Nakijima has special powers to go inside the book, known as bookjumping, and Thursday learns them in the next book in the series, *Lost in a Good Book*. In *The Eyre Affair*, her uncle, a scientist creates a portal, called Prose Portal, which helps the reader go inside the book. Similarly *Inkheart*, first book of the series *Inkheart*, has Mo,

short for Mortimer Folchart, who can read words and bring any object or person from the book outside but in return something from the outside world goes inside. Recognising his power, the characters from *Inkheart* that have come out because of Mo's reading call him Silvertongue. His daughter Meggie also has this power and so does Darius, a man Capricorn, the super villain of *Inkheart* (the one that we read and the one that Mo reads) hires to bring out his accomplices from the book. Darius is unable to read properly because of fear and therefore the characters or things that come out of the book are not always as described in the book. In contrast to these two books, we have *Sophie's World* which is written mostly from the characters' point of view who are aware about their lives being written. These characters, Sophie and Alberto break out of the text to enter the real world in which they are not seen or heard. These three books can be seen as the literary versions of virtual video games wherein the readers can go inside the book and play their part. Just like metaverse, a term coined by Neal Stephenson in 1992 to describe a unified avatar-mediated virtual context where people could interact with each other in a three-dimensional space (Lombardi 111), these characters are a part of a literaryverse which gives them the chance to interact with other characters. In *Inkheart* the characters that come out are seen as shadows or we can say avataric representations of the original characters in the book. Mo tells Meggie that even their coming out of the book has not changed the book in any way:

“...they're still in the book, too. Believe me, I've read it often enough since they came out of it, and the story's still about them... Perhaps things have changed there after all. Perhaps there's another, much larger story behind the printed one, a story that changes just as our own world does. And the letters on the page tell us only as much as we'd see peering through a keyhole” (82).

And this indeed happens in the sequel *Inkspell* when these readers enter the book and find a much larger world there. A similar world exists in *Thursday Next Series*. This literaryverse exists in the books and all these books exist in the library, a library which also exists in words and can be entered for the first time by reading its description. This world is controlled by Jurisdiction. In this literaryverse, characters have to keep on enacting their part and once their description is over in the book they are free to do what they want. Thus, Thursday is hidden from Jane Eyre who is the narrator of the book. It is only after she leaves that Mr. Rochester can help Thursday as Thornfield is completely at his disposal. In *Sophie's World* this literaryverse exists in our world where many characters have come out of the books and have their own establishments besides us. Just as avatars offer freedom of expression so do these readers in these texts encapsulate the feelings of many readers worldwide. By portraying books as magical portals, we the readers are given yet another adventure to embark upon and that too with the most important role to be played in the process.

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), like *World of Warcraft* (WoW), explains Nicolas Ducheneaut, have emerged in recent years as an increasingly popular form of entertainment:

“They offer persistent, richly detailed 3D universes in which players cooperate or compete with each other, trade, and socialize...What sets these games truly apart are their emphasis, by design, on sociability and interaction between the players... as a player gains in levels, quests become increasingly difficult to accomplish alone, reaching a point where a coordinated *group* of players is required to move further...” (135)

These literaryverses that we have seen also follow a similar structure. They portray a world where anything is possible, where every character is important and most importantly, where the readers and characters can interact. The distance

between the real world and the world within the pages is reduced. It will be noticed that all these things do happen when we read. We are interacting with the characters and we do find ourselves enchanted with the world in the book and simultaneously exist in both worlds with our reading. All these processes are depicted to us now with the help of these books.

In online virtual games based on books, the player can play with his/her favourite character or as his/her favourite character. The player can create multiple versions of himself/herself. In a way s/he can exist at two places at the same time. In books however, the reader has to enter the book and can exist only at one place in time. In contrast to this the characters that come out of the book continue to exist in the book. All the three books make provision for this. We have already discussed how Mo explains to Meggie that the book does not change. Similarly in *The Eyre Affair*, characters are always present to play their role. But outside what the words describe, lies a whole new world, where people live and go on with their daily lives. There are also tourists who can bookjump and enjoy this world. In *Sophie's World*, as soon as Sophie and Alberto leave their world, the writer writes the final word but the story stays as it as Hilde reads it again.

Though we say that the book remains the same, in *The Eyre Affair* we find the book being changed. In the alternative 1985, that this book takes place in, *Jane Eyre* ends with Jane leaving Rochester. When Thursday enters the book and Rochester helps her defeat Hades, in the process losing his eyesight, his wife and his house, Thursday decides to help him. She interferes and the story changes as the lovers reunite.

Though readers cannot exist in two places at the same time, what about the time itself? Is it the same in both the worlds? In video games, we are inside the game for as much time as we are outside the game but the time followed in games can be different, for example, we might play in evening but the setting of the game might show morning. When a reader enters a book, s/he enters at a particular time in the book. So just like

video games, the reader might be reading in the evening but might enter a scene which takes place in the morning. This all depends on which scene is being read. But the time spent inside the book is a different matter. When Thursday enters the book, she stays for many days, but outside it is just hours. Later when Mrs Nakijima comes out of *The Jane Eyre* to help Thursday, she explains: "The Rochesters sent me'. [Thursday says] 'But I only left the book three hours ago!' Mrs Nakijima interrupted. 'You left it barely twelve pages from the end. In that time over ten years have elapsed at Thornfiled; time enough for much planning!" (354) A similar notion is also expressed in *Sophie's World* wherein Alberto tells Sophie that a week may pass for us but for the people outside the book it will be just seconds.

In an article titled, "The Self and Second Life: A Case Study Exploring the Emergence of Virtual Selves", Simon Evans discusses how avatars can be helpful in exploration of one's identity. He explains that the self or virtual self is affected by experiences within virtual worlds. He states that his research has shown "...how living within virtual worlds is changing notions of who we are...how people are using such worlds to actively explore and construct who they are as selves..." and this particular essay highlights that "...virtual worlds are places where people live lives, form relationships and explore what it means to be a person" (34). In a similar fashion the readers and characters both are affected by their interaction and adventure in literaryverse. In *The Eyre Affair* Thursday decides to marry Landen and forgive him after seeing Rochester pine for Jane and realising the importance of love. Rochester in return of course benefits from Thursday as she finally helps him get his love and they later help Thursday get her love. Both value each other's friendship. In the sequel, Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations* saves Thursday's life and Thursday realises how much more there is to her than portrayed in Dickens's novel and in another fictional work mentioned in this book, their partnership is termed as the

greatest pairing Jurisdiction would ever see (317). In time of need, it is the characters that provide Thursday shelter and protection. In *Inkheart*, the writer Fenoglio is so excited to meet his characters alive that he tells them things about them that they do not know. Dustfinger who longs to go inside the book, wants to know how his story ends. This becomes a lesson for Meggie about life and characters. When Meggie is shocked to know that Dustfinger does not know how his story ends, Dustfinger has the perfect answer for her: “What's so unusual about that, princess? Do *you* know how *your* story ends?” (133) In *Inkdeath*, the third part of *Inkheart* trilogy, Mo also questions what he knows about himself. Acting more and more like Bluejay, the robber-cum-saviour to whom Fenoglio had given Mo's face and voice, Mo is left to question whether he was becoming Bluejay whose characteristics were slipping in to join Mo's or if “...the Bluejay always [had] been a part of him, merely sleeping until Fenoglio's world brought him to life?” *Sophie's World* presents another kind of struggle with self. Knowing that someone controls their life, their being, Alberto and Sophie think of being under the “world's closest surveillance.” They do not know their reality and so when Sophie asks Alberto if Hilde's father tells Hilde about them, Alberto has to tell her that they are just spirits:

“Are you saying that Albert Knag tells Hilde about us?” “Or writes about us. For we cannot perceive the matter itself that our reality is made of, that much we have learned. We cannot know whether our external reality is made of sound waves or of paper and writing. According to Berkeley, all we can know is that we are spirit.”

Sophie has to face the fact that she will never grow up and will be stuck at the same age till eternity, but as Alberto reminds her, she can also have a family and make new friends with the other literary characters that have come out of other literary books.

These books can be seen as presenting a virtual space wherein the readers and characters can live in the same space and communicate to know more about each other and to gain from each other. In video games, we can enter the game through an avatar, here however we see another reader like us entering the book. These readers are in many ways ideal readers thus can easily represent us even if not all their characteristics match with us. But we also metaphorically have always been a part of the books we have read. Thus Manguel states:

“However readers make a book theirs, the end is that book and reader become one. The world that is a book is devoured by a reader who is a letter in the world’s text...we are what we read...invisibly, unconsciously, text and reader become intertwined, creating new levels of meaning, so that every time we cause the text to yield something by ingesting it, simultaneously something else is born beneath it...” (173)

In these books we undergo this process while reading about this process being unravelled by other readers.

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