

# Analysing *e-lit* as Work of Literature: Is it Possible?

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## Abstract

This article presents an approach to the application of procedures and tools encountered in the narratology field of narrative electronic literature in order to point out if this new literature works can be analysed as traditional works. In order to reach the goal, a chapter of an e-lit narrative will be analysed: *Pry* (2014). An interactive App. novella, a multimodal work about James, a demolition consultant whose life has been broken after first Gulf War, created by Samantha Gorman y Danny Cannizzaro. The narratological analyses show that it is possible to do it but additional methodologies are needed if we want to do a complete analysis of the literary work.

*Keywords:* electronic literature, narrative, analyse, *Pry*.

## **Pry: An Introduction**

Electronic literature (e-lit) is considered an experimental literature that has increased and developed during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in poetry. If we focused on narrative and most specific on critical approaches to it, we founded less studies than with poetry. This article tries to fill some of this blank space by making an approach from a narratological analysis to an e-lit work. Through this analysis I try to point out that it is possible of analyse e-lit as literature with traditional narratological approach but it is necessary to add another methodology to complete the analysis.

In order to show up that statement the e-lit narrative work that is going to be analysed is *Pry*, but because it cannot be done in just a few pages, it is not going to be a complete analysis. The article will try to point out the most important and general points from the narratological analysis of the work.

*Pry* is an interactive application or a novella-app for digital touch screens created by art studio Tender Claws, available only for iOS. It tells us the story of a demolition consultant whose life has been broken after the first Gulf War

and he is losing his sight. It was released in two parts, the first part in 2014 and the following year the second one. The authors of this work are Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro. They described their work as follows:

Pry integrates reading and cinematic experience by reimagining how we can touch, open, close and pry into a text, moving seamlessly among words and images to explore layers of character's consciousness. Six years ago, James—a demolition consultant—returned from the Gulf War. Six months ago, his vision began to fail. At any point, pinch James' eyes open to witness his external world, or collapse his thoughts to dive deeper into his subconscious. Through a series of unique reading interactions, pry into a world of unreliable narration and shifted memory. A world that pushes digital publishing beyond simple mimicry of print conventions on screen<sup>1</sup>.

As mentioned, Pry needs to be download from Apple Store, where it is described as “a book to watch and film to touch: a story revealed by opening a character's eyes, pulling apart his memories and grasping his infinitely scrolling thoughts” (Tender Claws LLC).

So, as Clara Chetcuty points out, this literary work “asks the reader-user to touch, and to explore the nuances of touch in relation to bristling screen space and metamorphic text, not simply to trigger the default consequence of the gesture but to cause the app to react differently to the gesture” (Chetcuty 256). Furthermore, she explains how this work is using different modalities than most of the e-lit works such as still and moving images, audio, video, typography and text animation (256). So, one of the values of this work, as David Jhave Johnston<sup>2</sup> wrote, is the alternative expanded hybrid media page that it proposes, named as *tavits* (text-audio-video-interactives) (paragraph 11).

But, reading Pry requires, as Pressman points out, performing its title and central metaphor (262). In order to read it, she continues, we need to use our fingers, specially our forefinger and thumb to “pry open or pinch closed a virtual window, a space on the surface of the screen. Doing so produces a change on screen where in text appears beneath the immediate reading surface” (262). And she writes an important aspect of this work:

Unlike a book, the reading medium that inspired depth-based metaphors of reading, the digital tablet is not comprised of physical layers or, of course, paper pages. Reading by prying, or reading as prying, also rhetorically references the voyeuristic desire at the heart of reading novels. We pry into the lives of others when we read novels, and Pry programs this impulse – and the ultimate ambition of the novel genre – into its navigation system. In Pry, we pry open a portal to someone else's innermost thoughts, their unconscious. (Pressman 263)

Pry is divided into chapters preceded by a Prologue; seven chapters, each one employs different mode of gesture input; then an Appendix and Epilogue. The first one, the Prologue is a slow short film without words. It

shows us a young man, the protagonist, who is packing his duffel bag and preparing to go to war. Someone picks him up by car and at the same time some old films appears showing us a mother and a little boy who is playing with a ball and a dog. Then, the images shifts and become faster with scenes of the protagonist in the war with his military uniform. He is in the desert with two more military people a woman and a man (Pressman 263). The prologue is followed by the seven following chapters, each one with a different interaction with the screen. The Appendix, which makes text and pictures available on the basis of how much of the chapters you have completed, (Aquilina 210) shows up the aspects of game play that *Pry* contains. After reading each chapter the reader receives a red diamond, you need to get four in each chapter, and the reward is the unlocking parts of the appendix. This system came from the videogames world telling us that “gaming is reading, and reading a novel is a game” (Pressman 264). But this section goes further, it remediates all the information and provides crucial information, it shows an album of his life, giving us a more coherent and complete narrative (Aquilina 212).

### Analysing *Pry*

Once we know the kind of literary work that we want to analyse, it is possible to start the approach to *Pry* in order to answer the question: is it possible to analyse *Pry* as a literary work?. Because it is not possible to go through the whole work, the approach is going to be only on the first chapter and it is going to be used the traditional narrative analysis.

The first chapter, “Below and Above”, starts with the sentence: “six years later”; six years have passed since the prologue, when we saw our protagonist packing to go to the Gulf War. Then we watch a picture of a woman soldier that is coming to us, it is a black and white film, it disappears and we see the protagonist lying on his bed staring at the ceiling. A camera approaches to his eye until we get inside his pupil. Now, we are inside him, we are voyeurists of his life, his thoughts, his memories... In a way, we are one with the protagonist, James, who is also the narrator. “Awake, but not fully. What time is it?” (Gorman, Cannizzaro, *Pry*), it is the white text over the black screen that we can read and there also appears a picture of a hand and a sentence informing us: “Spread and hold open to see through James’s eyes” by doing it, we open his eyes and we start to pry with our fingers to his thoughts; at this moment, we see a swirl of black smoke and ink spirals over the ceiling. Then, the black screen with another white text: “Right, can’t move” and another caption with a hand: “Pinch and hold closed to enter James’ subconscious” (Gorman, Cannizzaro, *Pry*). When we do it, we see quick set of images from a optometrist’s office doing a vision test. We also see an eye, and all of these pictures suggest, by prying his subconscious, that our protagonist is suffering and is traumatised by the onset of blindness. Then, a long text appears.

So we are in a novel where we need to pinch and spread, to pry and to interpret what we see and “we readers of this digital novel find ourselves immersed in a work that demands that we engage multiple senses and navigational modes as well as methods of interpretation in order to access and appreciate a novel produced through digital technologies” (Pressman 264).

We are able to reach a narratological approach although the reading process is not easy, we are in front of an *ergodic* literature work. Ergodic is a concept used by Espen Aarseth taken from physics “that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning “work” and “path”. In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1). So our analysis is going to need effort.

Pry is a first-person narration, a text presented from the point of view of a character, especially the protagonist, as if the character is telling the story themselves. In this first chapter, because the features of the narrator, we can classify it as an unreliable (he narrates through his thoughts and his subconscious that are never reliable) and homodiegetic one (because the narrator is a character in the story). Moreover, the narrator is an autodiegetic one because is the protagonist of the narrative. In addition, if we focus on the perspective in which the story is told, we can describe this as an internal focaliser where the scene is perceived through the eyes of a character, most of the time through James (Garrido Domínguez 134-150).

In this first Chapter, James, the narrator, will show us how he is nowadays, in particular he is going to introduce his sleeping difficulties, his insomnia, his dreams, and his family memories. He is also going to introduce us to Jessie, his love. She is the female soldier who flirts with the third soldier but not with him. Reality, dreams and memories are intermingled and we only distinguish them because of our hand movement. That means, as mentioned, the work asks the reader to interact in order to reveal it and with each movement we will have access to James’s subconscious or (pinch and hold) see through James’s eyes (spread and hold).

In a literary analysis we need to focus on the plot, as Demetrio Estébanez defined, it is the story of the events in the way the author or narrator presents them to the reader in the work (Demetrio Estébanez 1052). The writer, when constructing the plot, organizes the material of events that constitute the story, ordering them freely on the temporal scale, anticipating certain events or presenting them in retrospect, taking different points of view, etc. (1052). When we start to read Pry, the first thing that comes to us after the first two selections of pinch and spread is that the succession of events is not going to be always the same. Sometimes we will choose to pinch and pinch; other times we will pinch and spread, or indeed other times we will spread and pinch, etc. The succession depends upon the reader under the different possibilities that the authors have inbuilt. So we will have different texts depending on our selection. Remarkably,

Gorman and Cannizzaro offer us a plot that is revealed by the decision of the reader but also by a certain control of the authors. The only way to get the whole story is to read the whole work different times in order to get the final story. Maybe this is the reason why each chapter has four diamonds that you can only get them when you have read certain contain.

Different levels of the narration are marked by the interaction of the reader. These levels are sometimes difficult to distinguish but with the difficulty the authors reflect, in a very good way, the confusion that we sometimes have when we are half awake and half asleep, and while the speech progresses through, these confusion will be increased.

One of the main components of the narrative text and the engine of the action are the characters. The main character in this chapter, and in the whole narrations, is the narrator, James. He is a dynamic character who experiences changes with the different situations he is experiencing. Through James's eyes we can see, at the end of the chapter, a woman who is above him, but at this point of the work, we do not know if the woman who we see is Jessie, the one on his subconscious, or another person. There are other characters who appear in his dreams and memories like his father and mother; or Luke a co-worker; and the third soldier. At the moment, they are flat characters; as in they are not complex characters or have only one dimension. But, as the chapter is ending, we realised that they will probably start to have more dimensions and may be they will be complexity characters. For example, Jessie in the whole work is a dynamic character who is described in his subconscious as a woman who has, at least, a kind of relationship with.

In *Pry*, when we are analysing the characters, we need to add, to the traditional literature analysis, a film analysis, paying attention on different scenes, the colours that are used, how the camera is shooting the scenes, and if there is noise or sound in the background, etc. This analysis is also important for the analysis of the narrator and how the events are told. So we can analysed from the traditional narratology way but there are some aspects that need multimodal methodologies.

The concept of space is another aspect to be analysed in a work. Sabine Buchholz and Manfred Jahn defined it as "the environment in which story-internal characters move about and live. Narrative space is characterised by a complex of parameters (...) it includes land-spaces as well as friendly or inimical conditions" (Buchholz and Jahn 552) and the spatiotemporal circumstances. In this first chapter the space is not only the desert in the Gulf, the images of his house, the bed in the room, etc. but his unconsciousness, his frightened self, his desires, etc., and they are introduced by pinching or spreading our fingers. Although we cannot go through them all, we can realised that they are possible to analyse as other literature works. We will find more difficulties but we can do it.

In this first chapter and in the whole work there are images and words that appear and disappear very fast; we cannot freeze them and they are not

legible at all. These flashing words or images that only appear with the haptic interactivity of the reader, following Aquilina, can be employed for aesthetic and meaning effect like metaphorical meaning as the idea of prying into the character's subconscious (Aquilina 211). Here again, we need to analyse this flashing words and images as a literature resource.

Finally, another element that needs to be analysed is time. When we start to analyse it (discourse time and story time) and space, we can do it as with traditional literature. The chapter starts telling us that we are six years later, and what we are reading is during the night, while the protagonist is trying to sleep. And we have different flashback memories, when he was 11 years old, when he was with her, etc. The time here is interspersed. But in order to develop the time it is important to notice the time that reader spends reading it, the differences that are involved in the appendix of the work (when you are winning a diamond, the appendix is enriched). The rhythm is also important, what the different movement implies in the narration and the difference techniques that are used in the work like text, film, sound. Hence here I will follow Nohelia Meza and Raine Koskimaa approaches. As Meza summarises, Koskimaa classifies "temporal possibilities in programmed texts", such as limiting reading time, delaying reading time, limiting the reading possibilities and temporally evolving texts; and mainly referring to the reading time and "temporal levels for cybertexts with narrative content": user time, discourse time -pseudo time and true time-, story time, system time -the time of the cybertext system states (Koskimaa 134-137) (Meza 301). And it is also important the analysis of simultaneity. We cannot go into detail of this analysis here, but it is important to point out how these need to be described in the approach to the work.

### **Is it Possible?**

A simple answer is: Yes. Throughout Pry's first chapter approach, it is shown that a narratological analysis is possible. However, as the interaction of the reader is needed, along with the use of multimodal and the necessity of re-reading the chapters, our traditional narratology is not enough. There is also the need of multimodal methodologies that helps to complete the reading.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://tenderclaws.info/sheet.php?p=pry>

<sup>2</sup> <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/prying-jhave-on-tender-claws-new-app>

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