

A Participatory Perspective on the Experience of Narrative Worlds

Richard Gerrig

Department of Psychology
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, NY, USA
richard.gerrig@stonybrook.edu

Abstract

As people experience narratives, they often behave as if they are participants in the narrative world. This talk embraces that claim to develop a participatory perspective on readers' and viewers' narrative experiences. This perspective asserts, for example, that readers encode participatory responses as reactions to characters' utterances and actions. The talk will review three areas of empirical research that have emerged from this perspective. The first area will be readers' experiences of narrative mysteries—circumstances in which a text raises questions that are not immediately settled. The second area will be the consequences of readers' participation as they weigh in on characters' actions and decisions. The third area will be the potential for changes in people's beliefs and attitudes as a product of their narrative experiences.

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1 Summary

As people experience narratives, they often behave as if they are participants in the narrative world. The core claim of the participatory perspective on readers' and viewers' narrative experiences is that readers regularly encode the types of mental contents they would encode were they really participants in the narrative's events (for a review, see [3]). For example, as people watch real-world events unfold, they are likely to encode preferences for how their acquaintances should behave and express approval or disapproval once those acquaintances have made behavioral decisions. People make parallel types of participatory responses—they encode preferences and evaluations—when they are transported to narrative worlds [2].

Several areas of empirical research have emerged from this perspective. An initial type of research has focused on readers' experiences of narrative mysteries—circumstances in which a text raises questions that are not immediately settled. How might readers respond to such mysteries? One possibility is that readers represent the information in the text without taking note of the mysteries it presents. However, the participatory perspective suggests that readers would attend to these mysteries as if they were real-world participants. By formally encoding such mysteries when they first arise, participants (in real life and as readers) are prepared to assimilate the mysteries' solutions. Research demonstrates several ways in which mysteries structure readers' narrative experiences (e.g., [4, 7]). For example,



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information related to mysteries remains prominent in readers' discourse representations when the mystery remains unresolved.

The participatory perspective has also generated research that documents the impact of participatory responses on the time course with which readers assimilate narrative outcomes. For example, Jacovina and Gerrig [6] suggested that readers encode mental preferences when characters make decisions; those preferences affect how readers comprehend narrative outcomes. To test these predictions, Jacovina and Gerrig wrote short narratives in which characters had to make a decision (e.g., whether Sandy should invest her holiday bonus in a safe stock or a risky stock recommended on a blog). Jacovina and Gerrig found that participants were slower to read outcomes sentences that presented mismatches between their preferred action and the outcome. These data suggest that readers encode participatory responses regarding characters' actions as they read narratives, and that these responses influence the time course with which they comprehend narrative events.

The participatory perspective also casts light on circumstances in which readers' narrative experiences change their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Researchers have provided a broad range of demonstrations that narrative experiences bring about persuasion (e.g., [8, 5]). The participatory perspective expands theoretical analysis of narrative persuasion by drawing on concepts from social learning theory [1]. Social learning theory suggests that people often learn by observing other individuals who obtain punishment or reinforcement. Because readers and viewers function as participants in narrative worlds, they also experience the vicarious influence of characters' outcomes. Thus, readers' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors may change as they observe characters' fates.

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