Professor Christoph Bode is looking at futures, in the plural – and not only in literature. He investigates ‘future narratives’ so as to design a conceptual framework for the analysis of this newly identified type of narration. Future narratives cannot only be found in fictional texts, they appear also in computer games and movies. What they have in common is that they are defined by multiple continuations and open-endedness. In the public sphere, they may well help to optimally communicate diverging scenarios of highly complex processes.

“Sometimes I feel like an explorer who maps the coastline of an unknown continent,” says Professor Christoph Bode. But his mapping takes place in the realm of the imaginary. Bode, who teaches English Literature, investigates what he calls ‘future narratives’, meaning narratives that preserve what he regards as an essential feature of the future, namely its openness, its undecidedness: they offer multiple continuations, different options, of which one will eventually be realized in the course of the narration.

Stories with alternate continuations are not a totally new phenomenon. There are 18th- and 19th-century novels with two (or more) different endings, but readers were hardly ever presented with both (let alone all) of them at the same time. In a more recent example, the ending of Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange (1962) in its American edition differs significantly from that of the British original, but few readers would buy two copies to check that. It is only in the 20th century that future narratives as a new type of narration gain significance and importance – and there is a technological reason for this: narrating futures relies on interactive media and interactive users. In 2007, Bode identified these future narratives and defined them as a new type of narration that is not to be confused with traditional utopian tales: “True, they’re both about the future,” explains the scholar. “But in classical utopias a unilinear story about past events is told from a point of view in the future. As a rule, utopias are past narratives, not future narratives. Just look at their grammar.”
In fact, narratologically, utopias and future narratives are worlds apart: traditional narratology is exclusively derived from the corpus of past narratives. “You can apply it to utopias, but not to future narratives,” contends Bode. “We simply lack a narratological grammar, a logic or a poetics of future narratives. We don’t even have a terminology that would allow us to just describe, let alone explain, what’s going on in this stunning, proliferating corpus of narratives. I find that amazing.” It is therefore the primary task of Bode and his team to assemble their own tool kit, custom-made for future narratives. But to achieve that, they had to first locate the overall distribution of future narratives: “At first, we didn’t know exactly how varied and widespread future narratives are. You see, they cut across all genres and media. That’s why they escaped notice as a corpus in its own right. After a year and a half, we have now compiled a corpus of existing future narratives. We’ve mapped the terrain. And we’re now measuring and analyzing these narratives.” And narrative, explains Bode, encompasses every arrangement of events that evokes a seemingly meaningful order.

This ambitious research project is made possible by an Advanced Investigator Grant from the European Research Council (ERC), amounting to almost one million euros. Bode is one of the few researchers from the Humanities or Social Sciences to have won this funding for a highly innovative, trailblazing project, which, by definition, has to go significantly beyond the state of the art and can open up totally new research areas. In the first phase of his project, Bode zeroed in on the fact that in addition to printed texts, future narratives figure largely in movies, computer games, and online games: “I’d never have thought that one day I’d turn to all that professionally,” says Bode, who is mainly known as a specialist on Romanticism. Much has been written about computer games as a mass phenomenon. In Bode’s view, they are the foremost examples of future narratives: replacing unilinearity with multiple continuations, they celebrate openness and option. And at this stage of media

Forerunner of ‘future narratives’: ‘Lola runs’ starring Franka Potente, a classic in contemporary German film history, presents the viewer with multiple continuations. But it has no nodal point, at which the viewer could decide how the story is to be continued.

Source: X Verleih AG
history, they radically morph into ever new complexities, opening new vistas and possibilities, so that much of what was new in the 1990s looks dated now.

This impacts on other media as well: a new format for movies was developed at the University of Tel Aviv that allows viewers to decide on the continuation of the story – by mouse click or touch screen. Depending on the taste of the audience, “Turbulence”, which has already won an award for technological innovation, lasts between one or two hours and has multiple, dramaturgically independent endings. Professor Nitzan Ben Shaul, the spiritual father of “Turbulence,” cites “Lola runs”, the German movie, as an inspiration. “It is true that ‘Lola runs’ presents the viewer with multiple continuations. That’s what makes it interesting for us,” says Bode. “But it is debatable whether or not this should count as a true future narrative. For if you define ‘choice’ as a minimum requirement, then this isn’t met by ‘Lola’: it has no nodal point, at which the viewer could decide how the story is to be continued. Rather, the alternate sequences are presented one after the other, without choice on the part of the viewer. However, this is changed radically and it’s an entirely new ball game, if you have the DVD.”

**Future Narratives Are the Ideal Way to Communicate**

Compared to that, the concept of “Milo and the Magical Stones” is cutting edge, in spite of its simple plot: in this children’s book a group of mice have to decide whether they want to undermine their own habitat – a mountainous island – prospecting for precious stones or whether they prefer to just superficially scrape the surface. The point is: the young readers may decide for themselves. From the nodal point onwards, the pages of the book are cut in two: the top halves of the pages lead to the ecologically correct ending, while the bottom halves lead to the collapse of the island mountain. “There is only one bifurcation, but that suffices for a future narrative,” says Bode. And this simple tale even qualifies for the next level of our analysis. After all, readers exercise choice based on information: at the nodal point, they can read in black and white which continuation will lead to a happy ending and which to a sad one. This is different from choice without information, when the player’s decision to either go through the left door or through the right door resembles a mere gamble, because he or she doesn’t know about the consequences.

This reminds one of a lottery, and contributes to a feeling of staged unpredictability. “Strictly speaking, nothing truly novel and unpredictable can happen in such scenarios,” opines Bode. “After all, the whole game evolves on a stage and in a setting devised by the game designer.” But if contingency is defined as the subjective feeling of unpredictability, then many computer games, especially the ones that aim at realistic simulation, come very close to what makes them so interesting as future narratives. This is because, as Bode argues, genuine future narratives are the ideal way to communicate and convey highly complex interrelationships in open-ended processes – even beyond the imaginary, in the realm of the real. “The diverging scenarios of world climate change are basically future narratives as
well,” says Bode, who chose meteorology and climatology as a minor subject when he was a student. “These future narratives are also the basis for political decisions and for public opinion. Our conceptualization could help to optimize the communication of these different future scenarios in the media and in the public sphere.”

The presence or non-presence of at least one nodal point, of choice, of information, and of the simulation of emergence and contingency are only the first distinctions that allow a differentiation of the field of future narratives. Bode and his team are looking at a far wider range of variables and interdependent levels that have to be distinguished to arrive at an adequate classification of even highly sophisticated future narratives. Firmly rooted in narratology, Bode and his co-researchers had to call on the expertise of other disciplines exactly when and where the reach of traditional narratology failed to depict what is new about future narratives. Invoking the help of mathematical game and decision theory and looking at computer-based simulations of open-ended processes, they also take philosophy, linguistics, historiography and other disciplines into account: “That is a kind of interdisciplinarity that genuinely derives from the subject matter,” beams Bode. They have a mathematician on the team. He helps to formalize the flows and profiles of future narratives. But the point is not to map every constellation and continuation that a future narrative allows. “We’re looking at the architecture of future narratives, the situation rooms and transitions between them, not at the specific movements of any concrete player or reader. And we’re looking for an abstract conceptualization that can be used irrespective of the medium in which the future narrative is situated, which, however, should also be flexible and media sensitive enough to depict the possibilities and specifics of a particular medium,” this is how Bode sketches the objective of the research project.

Many questions remain open – for instance the exact proclivity of certain media for future narratives – , and the team’s analytic tool box is not yet complete. “All this cannot be definitively concluded in the remaining year and a half,” says Bode with some regret. “But then, this is work-in-progress and we’re mapping an evolution that is progressing rapidly. Our subject matter is in the making. But one thing is for certain: at the end of this research project, we will publish our results and findings not only in printed form. Even now, we’re working in a wiki-structure that has links and multiple continuations, complete with primary and secondary materials, clips and screen shots. When we open this to the public, it will be open-ended. Like in a future narrative.”

THE ENDS

Translation: Christoph Bode

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