

## **The liminal narrative in temporal reality of sequential art forms.**

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Safa Tharib is an academic, animator, filmmaker, and animation researcher based in the United Kingdom. Dr. Tharib is currently a lecturer and researcher at Buckinghamshire New University, where they joined in 2022. They specialize in the creation and application of 3D computer graphics in both real-time and pre-rendered works. Before joining Buckinghamshire New University, Safa Tharib was affiliated with several academic institutions. They completed their Ph.D. in 2013 at Bournemouth University, focusing on the investigation of the uncanny in character design, behaviour, and context. Dr. Tharib was also associated with the National Centre for Computer Animation at Bournemouth University, working alongside other researchers in the field. Safa Tharib has been involved in various projects as an animator and filmmaker, and their work can be found at the NCCA Bournemouth University. They have also published research on the uncanny, character design, and 3D graphics. In addition to their academic and professional work, Safa Tharib is also known by the artist- name Kasper. They are currently working on a collection of sequential artworks using digital 3D methods that explore the process of story and character development, blending anthropomorphic characters with human characters in interwoven stories that change styles and tone depending on the specific narrative.

### **Abstract**

This study explores the effects liminality on sequential narrative works. Liminality exists in both spatial and temporal dimensions as well as in sequential art forms. As such, the idea of transition can be explored through time, place, and character. In the case of live-action media, liminality can be either overt or unseeable. This idea is explored through André Bazin's idea of objective reality, wherein, real work physical or living objects carry with them an undeniable physical presence that exists outside of the sometimes-fictional narrative of visual works. Within this article, the temporal aspect of liminality is explored through the transitional effects the very construction of narrative through subsequent effects on character, art design and the process used to construct the work. The effects of liminality are not contained solely in the work itself. Moreover, the very reading of this work is subject to a wide range of fluctuations in interpretation from the ever-changing perspective of the spectator. This article contrasts the effects of liminality on the objectively real and argues a case for a temporal reality that exhibits comparable liminal effects without the artefact being objectively real but rather artistically constructed.

## **Keywords**

Liminality; Objective Reality; Narratology; Sequential Arts; Artistic Research

## **Introduction**

Transient space pervades narrative on three basic levels. This article discusses the liminal nature of narrative through the perspective of the spectator, the author/artist and the elements used in the very creation of the work. Our lives and the lives of those involved in the creation of films, comics and other forms of sequential storytelling are themselves in a form of constant transition. This article aims to explore the use of transitional forms within narrative and the effects of such liminality upon the creation of the work itself. Liminality can be described as an in-betweenness, a point of existence that 'is neither here nor there' (McCooley & Hayes, 2017, p. 46). This can be thought of as a place somewhere along the point of transition without being at the starting or end points. In this article, liminality is understood to describe this transitional point between states. However, as will be later discussed many aspects pertaining to narrative are in a constant liminal state where in a start and end point are never clearly defined as to suggest that they would ever cease to be in a state of transition. This article will make a connection between the objective reality and the liminal perspective of the spectator. This idea is discussed later in this article and further explored using real-world transitional spaces in the comic *The Chronicles of the Damned*.

Narrative and our perception of the characters within said narrative are liminal in the spectators understanding. Different readings of the same film, comic and/or any sequential art form may change depending on the social and physical constructs that may or may not exist at the time of critique. There may be multiple factors that influence human perception. MacArtney et al., explores the notion of the effects of personal health on one's perspective. The human condition itself is a liminal experience that is dependent on environmental and physical effects (MacArtney, Broom, Kirby, Good, & Wootton, 2017, p. 624). It is difficult to make claims that social and individual views will change in the future. That said, even living today in what may appear to be an enlightened time when compared to social issues of the past that may or may not exist now; views will likely change. Elliott states that, 'the rhythm of change and alternation is normal in the life process and maintains homeostasis' (Elliott, 2015, p. 25). The idea of holding the same view throughout the life of an individual or social group presents its own set of problems. 'Perseverating with ill-fitting structures of thought and action brings individuals and societies to the edge of pathology' (Elliott, 2015, p. 25). The idea that such temporal conditions are limited to the spectator of the work is a fallacy, the artists themselves are defined by or in some cases in spite of the very social, physical and all together temporal conditions of the time and place they exist. We can understand this when we consider the changing attitudes to social themes that exist politically

and are mirrored in art. Our relationship and acceptance of art be it in entertainment or more challenging forms is ever changing as a collective species.

## **1. Objective Reality**

Bazin describes a physicality to an image referred to as the objective reality of it. It is here an interplay exists between the objectively real image and the fiction of the narrative. The spectator must first except the real image and then accept the fictional elements of the performance. This idea comes from theatre and was first coined by the philosopher and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 (Coleridge, 1984, p. 8). The idea itself being the audience who understand they may be spectating a work of fiction must first be sufficiently convinced by said performance to willing suspend their disbelief and partake in the narrative. Bazin's ideas take this idea further wherein, 'Bazin holds that the cinematic image is more than a reproduction, rather is it a thing in nature, a mold or masque' (Bazin, 2004, p. 6). To understand this idea in a modern context we must first understand the filmmaking and photographic process of Bazin's time. While today an image is made up of different coloured of pixels, in Bazin's time film had a much more chemical process. There was no concept of mathematical resolution related to pixel density. What existed was celluloid and a chemical process to bring out those images captured by light and shadow. This becomes a contentious point when trying to apply such thinking to modern day digital practice. Bazin held a great deal of distain to German cinema stating 'German school did every kind of violence to the plastics of the image by way of sets and lighting' (Bazin, 2004, p. 121). It is safe to assume, that Bazin would not have appreciated the construction of the modern cinematic image due to the very fact that many images have little to no objectively real elements to them and what is physically there is likely heavily manipulated through digital methods.

The time and place in which a work was made has an impact and thus shapes the overall narrative of the work. The ideological concerns of the time and place may have and often do have a physical effect upon the work. Some social and physical conditions may be fleeting while other more enduring. Nevertheless, can and likely will have an impact on the work creating in the vicinity of the time and place. 'Liminality serves as a rendition of identifiable forms for marginal concepts and is also identified with epistemologies of physicality' (Nic Theo, 2016, p. 164).

Any idea that a work of pure fiction can free itself of this temporal reality is fundamentally flawed. 'Fiction mediates between the dichotomy of lived time and cosmological time by elaborating imaginative variations on themes' (Gerhart, 1989, p. 95). Even the most forward-thinking individual is still very much a product of their time and place, conversely so is the most regressively inclined. For even the most nostalgic of notions are still interconnected to the current time and place in which they are experienced. That said, the argument surrounding objective reality seems more pertinent when we consider a film where a sufficient amount of time has passed, and the actors and environments maybe

be somewhat changed by the passage of time. Here the film remains as an objectively real record of the people and places involved in its creation. The narrative simply a reason for the film to be made in the first place.

## 2. A Narrative of Transition

Permeations of time on narrative can be considered to have both a real-world objective effect as well as the perception of the narrative itself. The effect of time must be considered in regard to the work and how the social struggles of that time in history shape the views of the artist as well as the ease in which information was available to them. A seemingly historically accurate film would be different based on how limited the perspective of the storyteller was. Cohn suggests elements where historical information was missing will be filled in with characterisation and transformation occurs (Cohn, 1990, p. 780). The hypothetical example of a narrative based on historical information presents an interesting object of study. If we assume that where information is available, then the narrative should be the same when or wherever it was created. There are going to be significant points that need to be created to move the narrative along in the sense of story. These events will have to be created by the storytellers of the time. As we have discussed, these storytellers are liminal and influenced by the time and place they live. As such, each inception of this work would illicit different readings of the narrative depending on when and where it was created.

Lee describes how Korean ghost stories aim to invoke a discourse of social change. With such an objective, 'in order to function as social commentary, the text needs to develop narrative strategies that will align the audience' (Lee, 2015, p. 127). The question being, if the social challenges of the time and place were different would these stories exist at all? If they would still exist, then how different would the narrative themes be? If we consider westerns from the 1950s or 1960s few films mention slavery, *Friendly Persuasion* (Wyler, 1956) being a rare example. This is not congruent with the Western genre films in the last twenty years. Such films have used slavery as a central theme, examples include *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012), *Amistad* (Spielberg, 1997) and *Manderlay* (Trier, 2005). While slavery was a major part of 19<sup>th</sup> Century history, the very fact it does not feature in narratives of early Western cinema and features heavily in later examples speaks to the changing social discourse around the subject. It must also be argued that the intended spectator and how the work is spectated plays an equal part in the narrative discourse within the work. Schoppmeier explored the western narrative created for the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar, 2018), in his paper Schoppmeier discusses how every event is awarded the same significance as any other. Schoppmeier disparagingly suggests that *Red Dead Redemption*'s open world entertainment experiences positions all historical elements on the same level and are equally discardable. He goes on to state that politics are disavowed altogether and as a cultural work *Red Dead Redemption* ultimately amounts to a

withdrawal from history' (Schoppmeier, 2022, p. 96). While the line between entertainment and challenging artwork may at times seem to blur. Nevertheless, the hypothetical line exists.

The liminal perspective of the characters within the narrative is an equally important consideration as the perspective of the one who is reading/viewing it. While a narrative can exist with a single solitary protagonist or indeed no characters at all, many narratives feature other characters who contribute to the story with varying degrees of impact. Ricœur suggests that each one of these characters are transitioning through time, wherein if the narrator so wishes could direct the narrative to explore their story. 'The priority given the as yet untold story can serve as a critical example for every emphasis on the artificial character of the art of narrating' (Ricœur, 1984, p. 74). A character whether they be artificial or not is arguably always in a state of transition up until the point they cease to be. Where in at this point, they are defined by the very temporal context that surrounded them.

### **3. Temporal Reality**

While Bazin's work largely ignored animated works (Bazin, 2004, p. xvi), one can surmise a great deal of information pertaining to the artist in a hand drawn image. During the 1940's and 50's the era in which Bazin's wrote much of his film criticism, animation was largely hand drawn. In the construction of the line and analysis of movement in hand drawn animated works one could pick out elements of a liminal and temporal reality that is co-dependent on the time and place the work was constructed. An exemplar of this could be the very ink that was used, the type of paper and the formal training of the artist(s) themselves. With the digital image, the physical presence is gone. 'Digital images not only can ignore the artist, they can ignore all reality' (Bazin, 2004, p. xvi). What remains is the Narrative. Narrative 'does not transcend but emerges out of contexts: it is situated socially in a context of communication, situated environmentally in a context of intelligible action, and situated biologically in a context of human embodiment' (Dwivedi, Nielsen, & Walsh, 2018, p. 5). In that is objectively real it is impossible to separate the real element from the fictional element completely. Barton Palmer discusses the notion of the actor and the acted, the performers must still remain themselves no matter what or who they are depicting (R. Barton Palmer, 2008, p. 67). When we consider the fact in drawn, modelled, or otherwise created characters that there is no performer in an objectively real sense, we should therefore consider the artist themselves. For here the characters and narrative which they are contained are created by an artist who themselves is positioned in a temporal reality dictated by the time and place where the character and narrative was ideated and ultimately created. 'Narrative itself, taken most fundamentally as a form of cognition, is paradigmatic of this relation of reciprocal and irreducible interdependence' (Dwivedi et al., 2018, p. 6). It is, therefore, impossible on a fundamental level to separate a particular work from the time and place it is created. Even with new digital methods of working where individuals can collaborate on a project while being at different

locations are themselves positioned in a time and place. Such times and places have temporal cognitive impacts on the work created. While objective reality no longer exists in photographic mediums. What does exist is a transitional and temporal reality. Take the unique art styles that have permeated film, animation, and the sequential arts. It is clear to the spectator of such works which era they may have come from. 'The ideological significance of particular events, acts, or texts involves their relation not just to this systemic frame of reference but also to its internal, structural logic' (Dwivedi et al., 2018, p. 6).

The transition of time can have a physical negative impact on a work such as a particular art style dependent on conditions stipulated by the era of creation not having the visual fidelity of works created via a modern practice. When we consider the early arcade games of the 1970s, simple sprites were used to represent complex elements. Those engaging with the game would have to use their imagination to a great extent to envision what was being represented. That said, it would not be too long until technology improved enough that games could use sprites that had greater visual fidelity due the increased number of pixels later systems could afford. *Street Fighter 2* (Capcom, 1991). *Street Fighter 2* is the sequel to the 1986 game *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1986). *Street Fighter 2* was a competitive fighting game that pitted two players against each other, Gingold compares its gameplay to that of rock-paper-scissors (Gingold, 2006, p. 157). *Street Fighter 2* 'is not the first competitive fighting game, it was the first major arcade success in the genre and credited with single-handedly reviving the arcade industry in the early 1990s' (Skolnik & Conway, 2019, p. 751). While *Street Fighter 2* is considered a classic, *Street Fighter* is not. These two games come from different eras of home console one being an 8-bit game and the sequel being a 16-bit game. *Street fighter 2's* visual style is what is referred to as pixel graphics. At the time pixel graphics was not a term used to describe the 2D art style, it is a modern term used to describe games that are made using pixels. *Street fighter 2* was cutting edge at the time and was globally successful (Surman, 2007, p. 209). Featuring stereo sound, large sprites, and engaging game play. If there were no such limitations *Street fighter 2* would be an exceptionally different game. An example of this is how the combo system emerged in the *Street Fighter* series. Originally this system emerged 'almost accidently' from *Street Fighter 2* due to the way the animation system worked at the time of development, this feature has now been intentionally developed in later games in the series and well as similar games developed by other companies (Ash, 2012, p. 193).

#### **4. My Practice**

In the process of trying to incorporate objectively real elements into my work I have framed the narrative of my current project *The Chronicles of the Damned* in real world. *The Chronicles of the Damned* is in essence a chase story featuring where a masked time-traveller known as *The Kount* arrives in the city of Hemlocke through an unstable time portal to retrieve a stolen navigation crystal from an

ancient and powerful witch named Aradia who has taken up residence within the city. With only seven hours before the portal will open again The Kount must navigate the city quickly to accomplish his mission or be lost forever. The main characters are themselves in a constant state of transition. While The Kount is disconnected from the world and people in which he finds himself in, Aradia up until the point the story takes place has been well integrated. It is later revealed that The Kount has been to the city previously during an earlier time when witches, ghouls and ghosts were part of everyday conversation that took place within Hemlocke. This change in social perspective forces him to accept the help of a local police detective Karla Banks. While the characters are digitally hand drawn the contextualising backgrounds are digitally manipulated photographs, see figure 1. Rather than photographic element be used purely as an efficient way of creating backgrounds it also allows me to plan and position characters in real world physical and objectively real locations, see Figure 4. Here camera angles and focal lengths must be considered in the later composited characters in mind as if they were physically present. The city of Hemlocke itself is made up of real-world locations obtained photographically and with the use of 3D photogrammetry around the city of Leicester, Birmingham, as well the towns of Telford and Bridgnorth. The story is typically depicted on a square page with four panels of varying size. Manipulated photographs is not in itself a new concept in comics, there are examples of this in Japanese Manga (McLelun, 2017). Comics and manga have been created with a wide array of different tools and technology throughout their inception. Hiroya Oku the creator of Ganz has used 3D techniques to facilitate in the creation of his works (Cimi, 2021). Shatter is considered to be the first digital comic and was made using the original Macintosh computer before the availability of digital pen inputs (Gillis & Saenz, 1985).





Figure 1: Interior sequence © Safa Tharib

Due to the role the photographic images play in *The Chronicles of the Damned* the composition of each panel mirrors that one would expect in a live-action film rather than an illustrated comic. The transitional changes in technology work in unison with the depiction of the narrative to shape the story rather than despite it. This is not a limitation of the method but as previously discussed plays a part in the temporal reality of it. The images captured for the work have an objectively real property that is indeed temporal. Both interior (Figure 1) and exterior locations (Figure 2) are subject to the same external changes that any real-world object or person is. A building may last for many years or be demolished within a few days after its image was used in this work. Interior layouts may drastically change depending on new needs for that location outside of this project. As such there is no guarantee that any location will stay the same, nor would it be expected to. While meaning is instilled in these



places via the fictional narrative, all places have meaning outside of the work. Real world physical spaces carry with them their own meaning that is bound to the people who inhabit or visit them. This meaning goes beyond the scope of any narrative that can utilise them for artistic storytelling purposes. Like with a live-action film an individual enamoured with the story or characters related to the work can go and visit the real-world places. Meaning will change through time the narrative will be read differently but the objective reality of the photographic elements will remain objectively real.



Figure 2: Exterior sequence © Safa Tharib

One of the locations used for *The Chronicles of the Damned* was a shopping mall car park in Telford (see Figure 4). This is one of the less historically significant locations in the project. Nevertheless, this location forms part of the fictional city of Hemlocke. In real-life this car park is one of many car parks for the shopping mall and is located at the back of the large Debenhams department store. This Debenhams store has closed and is no longer operational and was closed a year prior to

obtaining the photographic materials for *The Chronicles of the Damned*. While not an obvious example of significant reality, this location demonstrates the liminal landscape. One would not expect the signage of Debenhams to remain, the large store front itself may in time come to be used by another company. Using this location in *The Chronicles of the Damned* at this time demonstrates the temporal qualities that objectively real places exhibit. One may argue that this would be true whenever the images were captured, this is true because objective reality exists in every transitional moment.



Figure 3: Interior sequence with varying focal lengths © Safa Tharib

While this method is not devoid of challenges that come with the creation of any sequential art medium, new challenges are introduced. Different focal lengths are used in traditional film making and photography to convey different meanings, moods, and context. The use of a photographic medium in this work combined with the semi-realistic character style means cinematic framing needs to be adhered to. As such drawing needs to match the focal length of the camera. In Figure 3, one panel at a 50mm focal length is juxtaposed against a panel at 20mm. This juxtaposition has narrative purposes to express the potential danger The Kount is in with a weapon pointed close to his face. One expected challenge was to have drawn the characters at the same focal length as the backgrounds. When progressing with this project I expect a visual mismatch to occur when the lens distortion of the background and characters do not match. However, as can be seen with Figure 3, this mismatch does not interfere with the consumption of the image. One advantage of using photographic images for backgrounds is that they can be cropped and further processed to match the crop factor of different camera lenses providing the original picture is taken at a sufficiently wide angle and resolution.





Figure 4: Positions





Figure 5: Close-up panel © Safa Tharib

While I have discussed how objective reality in the background images irrespective of the actual fictional narrative of *The Chronicles of the Damned*, there exists a temporal reality in the construction of the characters themselves. Figure 7 is section from another project called *Clockmills Drive*. The narrative tone and formality are different to *The Chronicles of the Damned* and therefore so is the art style. Both *The Chronicles of the Damned* and *Clockmills Drive* have different methods and approaches in the construction of their image panels. As such, they each rely on different technological tools which in turn requires different approaches and working practices. Both of which are dependant of the time when the artwork was created. Both works are produced digitally, *The Chronicles of the Damned* mainly uses digital 2D tools in its creation and requires the characters to be hand drawn in various poses and expressions required by the narrative. While there are some 3D elements in both works *Clockmills Drive*



uses 3D tool extensively. This requires the characters and backgrounds to be created before the image can be posed. Some of the advantages of this method is it allows for a wider range of angles when composing the image due to the ease in which the camera can be changed. Wide angle shots such as in Figure 3 require more extensive planning and the speed and accuracy in which they can be created is dependent on artistic skill. As such, mistakes in character proportions can be made.

When comparing Figures 5 and 6 to Figure 7, the differences in the art style are apparent mainly due to the different processes employed. It would be remiss to deny the input from the creator and the execution of the various artistic decisions that need to be made in the creation of the image. Nevertheless, both technical and artistic aspects of these images are subject to the temporal changes in time as any other real object would be. This is made more apparent due to the fact a single artist has constructed the entire image. Not only is the individual approach to the work captured in the image but also the skills and weaknesses in the representation of the subject matter.



Figure 6: Medium-Shot panel © Safa Tharib

While temporal emotional connections to objective reality may be more visibly tangible. The temporal reality of the constructed images exists and is equally dependant on the liminal social and physical changes that surround their creation. Moreover, as we have previously discussed in



artforms that are directly dependent on technical advancements, here too, the availability and advancement of technology plays a role in the artistic options available to the artist and this in turn shapes the image. In the context of the project presented here, narrative construction, art style and the complexities of characterisation are all dependant on time, place, and context. With images created by an artist, be the final application physical or not it can be argued that a temporal reality exists within the constructed image.



Figure 7: Clockmills Drive © Safa Tharib

## 5. Limitations

Some consideration must be placed on emerging creative technologies such as artificial intelligence which if considered as a temporal as a tool the argument of temporal reality still hold true. However, further discussion will be needed to understand the true liminal nature of practice that uses artificial intelligence as its use in creative work grows and develops.

## 6. Conclusion

As we have discussed, objective reality and liminality are intrinsically connected. In this article we have unpacked how social, technical, and physical changes impact digital creative work. This stipulates digital work to the same temporal effects that objectively real elements do. In this article we have made a case for temporal reality in the constructed image. While objective reality allows for those connected to and those not connected to the artistic work to have an emotional connection to the objectively real object or person contained within the work. Temporal reality requires engagement with the work to illicit any tangible connection in the spectator. The narrative, art style and overall construction of any creative work is dependent on the ever-changing conditions that surround it. While temporal changes in artificial works may be more apparent when a single artist has worked on them, especially when considered against a body of work. These temporal changes affect every contributor.

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