

Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Updated ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016. ISBN 9780262631877.

*Reviewed by Jess Phillips*

*Hamlet on the Holodeck* was first published in 1997 and was met with both praise and condemnation. Janet H. Murray's original work was highly speculative and in many respects accurately predicted how storytelling in "cyberspace" would evolve as the twenty-first century dawned. Murray accurately foresaw, for example, that episodic television would migrate to the web and that viewers would be able to "binge watch" on demand entire seasons of their favourite dramas (318). Indeed, Murray is uniquely positioned to offer up such a forecast: she began her professional career as a computer scientist at IBM in the 1970s, later researched at MIT's Experimental Study Group, and in 1992 began teaching an electronic fiction course to students from both the humanities and the sciences, also at MIT.

Murray's 2016 edition of *Hamlet on the Holodeck* features the same core content across ten chapters with the addition of bite-sized updates tacked on to the end of each. These updates, however, add little to the original edition, serving mostly to recapitulate her original thesis and offer the reader a revised bibliography for further reading. Some do, however, proffer defences for a few of her more controversial claims, including what some critics in 1997 regarded as the most problematic position taken in the book: the idea that Tetris "allows us to symbolically experience agency over our lives [as] it is a kind of rain dance for the postmodern psyche, meant to allow us to enact control over things outside of our power" (178). This claim is representative of the overly sentimental, optimistic and occasionally uncritical stance Murray adopts throughout *Hamlet*. At times, her contention that to



“understand who we are and what we are doing here ... we need every available form of expression and all the new ones we can muster” is difficult to endorse, with her argument assuming a quality more akin to passionate manifesto than rational argument (7, 345).

Murray begins *Hamlet* by describing the nature of the holodeck as it first appeared in the 1987 television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and how this fictional invention relates to her hopes for the future of narrative in cyberspace. *Star Trek's* holodeck was a computer capable of producing extraordinary simulated fictional environments or illusory worlds that behave just like the real world, allowing participants to be touched, felt, kissed and engaged in conversation in real time. Murray describes it as “a universal fantasy machine, open to individual programming: a vision of the computer as a kind of storytelling genie in the lamp” (17). In championing the representational power of the holodeck, Murray attempts to allay fears that the more persuasive the technology—such as the “feely” theatre from Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*—the more dangerous it is, and the more likely we are to have our culture “stripped of life and meaning” and be reduced to a state of “abject bestiality” (23). Murray argues that the holodeck, like the other digital storytelling platforms she discusses, should not to be feared because ultimately, we are in control, we have agency. “Like any literary experience,” Murray writes, “the holodeck provides a safe space in which we can confront disturbing feelings ... and our most threatening fantasies without becoming paralysed by them. The holodeck is an optimistic technology for exploring inner life” (27–28). Murray’s advice to those questioning the representational power of simulation devices like the holodeck, Virtual Reality (VR), and other computer based realities, is to give ourselves time because we will eventually habituate to them (as we have done with the printing press and the cinema) and no longer concern ourselves with the medium, but with the message and what “truths the story has revealed about our lives” (28–29). Murray’s minimisation of Huxley’s fears and her championing of VR as a representational medium that may offer us as much, if not more, agency than the real world, is representative of her tendency to glorify and offer unreserved endorsement of all technology. While these arguments are interesting, it is difficult to see how immersion in an alternate reality can offer us more agency than our day to day lives; it may provide us the with illusion of possessing more, but this then raises the question of whether it is even possible (or desirable) to compare the agency experienced in a virtual environment with that of our actual environment.

While Murray's expertise is apparent—through, for example, her perceptive discussions of how Vladimir Propp, Deleuze and the bardic oral traditions of medieval Europe can be lenses through which to understand the computer as a powerful storytelling medium—her authority is significantly compromised at times. For example, when she encourages readers to embrace every Silicon Valley invention, from *Twitter*, to *Facebook*, to *Netflix*, without critically attending to the psychological implications that arise when a company's key metric (and their commercial measure and determinate of success) is how much time users spend on their platform. Many of these platforms, which have teams of engineers mining the academic literature of the psychological sciences for cognitive biases that may then be used to manipulate users into spending their time wedded to a screen, are incompatible with the kind of immersive rapture she believes the computer, as a storytelling medium, promises. Her failure to respond to the objections raised by the likes of the "Time Well Spent" movement (founded in 2015 and led by Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist at Google) is not only disappointing, but somewhat odd. Given her associations with leading universities such as MIT and Georgia Institute of Technology, it seems unlikely that she is, or could be, oblivious to these vibrant "ethical tech" movements that are highly critical of the kind of blind technological optimism she endorses.

Ultimately, Murray provides a rich, detailed, and passionate account of what she sees as the future of narrative in "cyberspace." At times however, *Hamlet* tends towards sentimentalising the computer whilst demonising those who, like Huxley, critique the persuasive (and pervasive) nature of digital communication and entertainment mediums. Nonetheless, Murray makes a compelling argument, —one that is also somewhat redemptive—when she maintains that "the diversity of expression that new storytelling affordances are making possible," together with the "making visible of acts of injustice which would otherwise remain undocumented," renders the computer a powerful and important tool that can be manipulated for good (360).

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