

Intermediality in Film and Internet:
Donnie Darko and Issues of Narrative Substantiality

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The structured re-telling of events from our life forms a narrativized account of who we are. But it's not just our own narratives that shape our experiences; it's what we see on screen: as Sandvoss shows, in many ways we identify our sense of self with mediated narratives (96). With websites that facilitate hypertextual and multilinear narratives, and with cinematic representations of narrative meaning, it becomes important to examine changes in mediated narrative structure, so that we can start to understand changes that happen in our conception of our selves. To illustrate this, I examine the narrativity of the *Donnie Darko* über-text through a comparison of the website <www.donniedarko.com> to the film *Donnie Darko*. I show that the viewers of both become actively engaged in the narrative formation of the text. I then go on to demonstrate that the *website* uses conventions of linear narratives while the film itself is multilinear and ultimately hypertextual. I suggest that this difference creates an intermediary between media states, and it is in this intermediary that the text named "*Donnie Darko*" exists. This über-text exists in-between the film and the website, and emerges through a user's complex interaction with digital media.

It is important to examine this mediation of narrative because narratives are the a distinctly human trait – if we are the only species to elaborate our life in narrativized terms, then a shift in narrative form would indicate a shift in the way people organize their lives. Indeed, Stephen Johnson shows that new narrative structures encourage more intellectually demanding viewers; that is, audience members whose intellects have been stimulated and advanced by the demands that new narratives have placed upon them. Indeed, narratives and stories universalize experiences to such an extent that they are useful in settings outside the normative expectations

for fictional plots. For instance, as pointed out by Dan Gruen et. al., narratives can be seen as “powerful communication and teaching tools” for corporate endeavors, and can “help multidisciplinary teams work together, and help end-users understand and discuss how a [computer] system would fit into their lives” (504). It is the *story* that translates between fields of study. The comprehension of narrative designs allows people to understand the structures that influence their lives, no matter what the contexts. Indeed, an understanding of new narrative structures becomes foundational for studies of human activity.

The interplay between narratives in different media, however, reveals a disturbance in our understanding of narrative form itself. On the one hand, linear media like cinema have low interactivity, but a high degree of narrativity. On the other hand, multilinear media like the Internet are limited in their narrative structure because of their high degree of interactivity. Specifically, the *Donnie Darko* website lies in a different relation to the eponymous film. Beck has written about the relationship between the film and the website for *Donnie Darko*: the website “pick[s] up on the thematic logic inherent in the actual film text” and “allow[s]...users to dwell, protract and luxuriate in the diegetic space that the film has constructed” as a narrative (56-57). For Beck, the website for *Donnie Darko* enhances the narrative by including dispersed elements that operate together to form one cohesive plot. I argue instead that, with the change in the temporal structures of new media, the website for *Donnie Darko*, based on the film and serving as both an extension of and an explication of its plot, exists in a relation to the film that belies its status as a unique media. The website completes the fabula of the film, but in doing so, must subsume its own multilineality. The website substitutes lineality for interactivity in the fulfillment of filmic expectations as the Internet negates the effects of a temporal narrative and the website makes the *syuzhet* a formal aspect of the medium. Thus, in the film *Donnie Darko*,

the relationship between the fabula and the syuzhet differs from their relationship in the website *Donnie Darko*. This difference is read by the viewer as an intermediary text: the complete text of “*Donnie Darko*” exists precisely in-between these media narratives. This break happens not just because of the high/low interactivity divide, but also because of the inherent relationship between narrative and time.

Briefly, I should enunciate some definitions of what I refer to in this paper as “linear” and “multilinear” narratives. A linear narrative follows chronological convention: the narrative text follows a cause/effect pattern, occurs in the temporal order predetermined by the creator of the text, is unchanging, and remains comparable to the temporal order of “reality.” An example of a linear text might be a traditional theatrical play: the scenes follow one another chronologically, and rarely can the viewer skip ahead, or could the author of the narrative plot the effects of the narrative to follow their causes. By “multilinear” narrative, I refer to the capacity of the narrative to depict events outside of conventional order. For example, effects might occur before causes, there may be different paths through the text the user might navigate, or narrative closure may be preempted by narrative complexity. An example of a “multilinear” text might be the hypertextual story *afternoon: a story* by Michael Joyce (1999). In this web-based narrative, the user controls her own path through the text by clicking through hypertextual links. The order of the events in the story is not constant, for they appear to the user in the order that he/she clicks on them.

If narrative becomes the way which we organize our conception of time, then the narrativized events themselves would create the order of our perceived time, although the interpretation of that order cannot be undertaken by either the narrative or the events. It must be the persons (re)- interpreting the events in the text that creates the narrative structure. Time, in

other words, is a mutable concept in narrative, because the specific order in the retelling of the events causes a change in the interpretation of those events in a temporal sequence. In film studies, this difference in narrative conception is described by the terms *fabula* and *syuzhet*. Bordwell defines the *fabula* as “the action [of the narrative] as a chronological cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field” (49). In other words, although “the *fabula* is never materially present on the screen,” it exists as the association viewers construct from the events as presented on screen (49). What is viewed onscreen “is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula*,” the *syuzhet* (50).

David Herman also indicates this connection, as he states that both temporality and spatialization are two important concepts in narrative structure. His concept of the *storyworld* indicates the viewer’s reconstruction of “not just what happened” in the story, but also “the surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved” (14). In this way, the *storyworld* encompasses both “the temporally [and] spatiotemporally structured” events. As both Bordwell and Herman have indicated, temporality can be interpreted as duration, frequency and order, and in any of those three cases, *time* as a concept shapes *narrative* as a concept. Duration refers to the temporal length of an event in the text: in other words, how much emphasis each event is given in that specific text. Alternatively, frequency refers to the nature of how many times some event is referenced in the text. Order, appropriately, alludes to the arrangement of the events in a story.

Herman has also shown, however, that the definition of the *fabula* depends on the concurrent definition of the *syuzhet*. If the *fabula* can only be known through the viewing of the *syuzhet*, then the question remains, where does this *fabula* exist? As Richard Walsh states in the

conclusion of his argument, “fabula is not independent of any sujet – it is entirely dependent upon sujet, is nothing other than the permutation and assimilation of sujet features into an ongoing interpretative version” (604). The fabula is the reconstruction of the events in the syuzhet, and yet the syuzhet purports to depict the fabula. The relationship between the fabula and the syuzhet is thus one that is paradoxically both constructed and constructive.

Narrative reconciles this paradox by existing *simultaneously* as the fabula and the syuzhet, *simultaneously* as story and discourse. As Marie-Laure Ryan points out, it also exists *simultaneously* as two conceptions in our culture: narrative as representation (or, mirror onto an alternate world) and narrative as cognitive mode (or, structure for understanding our world) (242). For Ryan, therefore, different modes of narration depend on different *experiences* of narration. Narrative is both a mimetic experience, in which events seem to mirror an extant reality, or narrative is a cognitive experience, in which events form a basal structure from which discourse can be constructed.

The passivity of those definitions belies their causation. In traditional narrative analysis, the interpretation of traditional narrative comes through the minds of the director or the author of those works. The narratives, in other words, is created by an auteur. The communication of narrative in the digital, however, becomes based, in part, of the function of the medium that presents that text. In other words, the narrative of the cinema is different from the narrative of a printed book, is different from an electronic medium’s. New media, for example, can have different authorships. The form a particular media takes affects how the viewer or the reader will interpret the narrative produced in it. In hypertextual environments the narrative is created by the user.

Websites amalgamize of the role of the author and the user. The author, a designer of a website, is a person who writes the text and designs the graphical layout of the spread. She also creates the links that serve to define the website as a website: by linking from webpage to webpage, the website takes as its structure a latticework or a network. If, as stated by Janet Murray a “linear story, no matter how complex, moves towards a single encompassing version of a complex human event” then it necessarily “has to end somewhere” (136). But on the Internet, a story can have many endings and can have many different avenues to follow.

The author of a website, therefore, has little to no control over any of the three aspects to a user’s temporality. The same can be said of DVD viewers, because the DVD also allows hypertextual viewing of a film – one can often “link” to extra-textual content and secondary features. However, the main text of the DVD – the film – is intended to be viewed linearly. Unless the author severely limits the interactivity, and thus conversely increases her control over the path of the viewer, the user has more complete control over how he or she can view the text. This is true in both DVD technology and in Internet technology. For example, given that the user of a website can control the duration of her time on each webpage, can increase or decrease the frequency of how often he or she goes to a particular webpage, and can go to webpages in any order, the author has virtually no influence over how much or how little temporality there is in a website. Thus, to be seen as an author, the designer must substitute a linear plot for interaction.

Although the structure of a website may not be a linear one, the point remains that a structure there still exists. Andrew Gibson postulates that interactive fiction “radically disrupt[s] the kind of presumption of a singular space on which narratological thought depends” (10). Indeed, although many interactive fictions on the web reject linearity as a structure, structures

still exist. Although interactive fiction “challenges the spatial models on which narratology has thus far depended,” it does allow for other, less linear structures to develop from it (Gibson, 11). Gibson eventually concludes that these web-based multilinear stories need “models other than the standard geometrical ones” (276). Mark Stephen Meadows, as well, claims that “nonlinear choices need to be allowed within the contexts of the linear story” and that “time, [therefore] might be considered as a volume” rather than a pointed ray (51-52). Users must therefore “experience narrative itself” as newly emergent (Gibson, 276). To understand this newly emergent narrative, however, one need understand the constituent elements of a website narrative. If temporality is determined not by text itself but rather by the experience of viewing that text, then that contextual experience is a defining characteristic of the website. The makeup of that contextual experience, however, is a complicated conjunction of elements that require complex decoding.

Thus, the continuation of the same text from one medium to another signals a shift rich in thematic meaning for the perception of formal relationships. In the cinema, for example, the relationship between the *fabula* and the *syuzhet* remains firmly textual: although in some films it is possible to see an alteration in the *use* of that relationship, it remains a relationship that occurs onscreen. The medium expresses the form. In the case of the Internet, the function and the form of the narrative change. The complex interaction between an interactive experience like a website and a more conventional narrative structure like a film, especially when both those media re-tell the same narrative events, creates a dichotomy of information for the viewer of each. Specifically, when interpreting the *fabula* in one of these media, the viewer could encounter problems when then faced with a contradictory, or even complementary, piece of

information from the second. There is textual confusion when one fabula is presented by two syuzhets.

Such textual confusion occurs with the relationship between films and websites based on those films. The history of the connections between films and their now-requisite websites is not vast: with the relatively recent appearance of the Internet in the span of cinematic history, it is no surprise to see few film's official websites dating back more than ten years. Within this recent time span, however, we can see the enormous influence the Internet has had on cinema audiences. One of the first major uses of the film industry made of websites is with the horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Part of the horror from the film stemmed from the shrewd application of its companion website, <www.blairwitch.com>. A completely fictitious back story, written to supply the necessary information to make the plot believable, appeared on the website months before the film's release. Like the film's narrative, the narrative of the website portrayed the events surrounding the Blair Witch in a documentary style, referencing real places and historical situations. These "outtakes from unused footage, faked official documents and interviews that suggested a police cover-up ... began to build the legend of the Blair Witch" to the "target demographic" for the film, 18-35 year olds (Maiese, S8). It was the use of the Internet as far-reaching word of mouth that allowed the film as much success as it had. In fact, in terms of the rise in popularity of the Internet, the marketing strategy of *The Blair Witch Project* "provided startling evidence of the power of this relatively new medium to build an audience for a film" almost single-handedly (McDowell, 140).

Further linking the connections between the cinema and the Internet, Lunenfeld elaborates upon *The Blair Witch Project* and <www.blairwitch.com>, going so far as to call the website "an unusually successful instantiation of the interactive cinema" (385). By combining

all these elements to aid in the background story of the film itself, the website creates “a new communications medium to play off the spectatorial tension” of the film (383). Lunenfeld calls this website “hypercontext,” as it “prime[s] the target audience” for the film; thus, the interaction between the two media thus solidifies the viability of the Internet-filmic relationship (384).

Another aspect of the relationship between a film and its website occurs within fan participation in the filmmaking process. This interactivity allows filmmakers access to some knowledge of how their film will be received by the intended audience. As an illustration of this, Peter Jackson used the Internet to elicit feedback on his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films. Because *The Lord of the Rings* has a fan base already established due to Tolkien’s novels, these fans of the franchise were “actively courted by Jackson and New Line Cinema throughout all aspects of authoring, casting, filming, and marketing the trilogy” (Shefrin, 262). Indeed, it was through the Internet and the *Lord of the Rings* website that Jackson was able to “co-opt the overall import of fan opinion” (Shefrin, 267). By using the website for the film, Jackson was able to get legions of fans participating in the filmmaking process and attempted to guarantee a certain level of satisfaction with the final filmic product. The Internet fostered a community of fans, and generated a large-scale assurance for *Lord of the Rings*’ box office success. In fact, as Zufryden found, “website activity is indeed a statistically significant variable in relation to a film’s box-office performance...website activity is instrumental in creating awareness for a film as well as promoting a site visitor’s intention to see a film” (62). The use of a film’s website for promotion of the film can be extremely helpful for a film’s later opening-day box office take.

Both *Blair Witch* and *Lord of the Rings* used the websites as external comments on the filmic narrative; the relationship was that of journalistic article to subject. In this, each separate viewing of these websites is in itself an experience that can be narrativized. The user of a

website goes through the nodes, hyperlinks and in a particular order, and even if those nodes are viewed more than once, or the same hyperlink followed many times, there is a chronological expansion to the viewer's perception of time (Landow, "Critic"). In other words, the user of a website *experiences* a linear path even if the website itself is structured as a multilinear environment. There are multiple paths, but the experience of traversing a path is linear. Let us consider, however, a case where an extant narrative already exists for the website: the über-text *Donnie Darko*, consisting of the film and its website, <www.donniedarko.com>. Through an analysis of the relationships between the narratives of the two, we can uncover a system of narrative expectations that alter and shift our interpretation of each their respective narratives. By analyzing the fabula/syuzhet relationship in the film as well as in the website, we can see how this complex interaction creates an intermediary between media states.

The key to this intermediary state lies in the nature of the fabula/syuzhet paradox. When one fabula produces two syuzhet, how do we parse the difference – where does this difference lie? When there is no clear, demonstrated definition of a website's narrative, when the construction of a narrative depends on the temporal construction of the viewing of a website, it alters the viewer's construction of that site. However, given both the complicated relationship between the fabula and the syuzhet and the intricate connection between the website and its film, the medium of the web merges its form with its function. For the *Donnie Darko* website, a fabula already exists, and thus it substitutes the interactivity inherent in the medium for the temporal lineality of the fabula, and establishes the syuzhet as a formal element of the medium. In other words, the user of the website becomes the controlling force over the syuzhet, and in doing so, creates her own viewing experience. The change in the interpretation of the syuzhet is not so much a redefinition as it is a reapplication of the term to a new medium.

The seemingly benign relationship between the fabula and the syuzhet of *Donnie Darko* belies the complexity of the film's plot. By explicating the key events of *Donnie Darko*, we can see how at first what appears to be a simple time-travel story takes on additional complexities when viewed as an aspect of the fabula/syuzhet relationship. The film depicts a twinned fabula with parallel tracks which each recursively links back to each other, in form much like a Mobius strip. For the audience watching the film, director Richard Kelly depicts the subjective experience of Donnie's traveling through time in a way reminiscent of Herman's analysis of temporality in Seghers's *Der Ausflug*: "Events that did not happen have in some sense already occurred, but only within a multivalent temporal system whereby some events must be assigned the value of Indeterminate...they have *both* already happened and *also* not yet happened in the time frame of the story" (226). Although Herman here writes about effects that *logically* (or, perhaps better, illogically) happen before causes in the textual story of Seghers's, the implication of the quotation applies to *Donnie Darko* quite aptly. In the case of *Donnie Darko*, the events that cause the death of the title character are caused by his avoidance of his death at the start of the film. It is "endlessly circular" and "begins with a scene that belongs at the end of the last time you watched it" (Emerson, 2).

For example, early in the syuzhet of the film, Donnie somnambulates out of his bedroom and survives the apparition of a jet engine plunging directly above his bed. Had he not left, he would have been killed by the mysterious appearance and descent of the engine. At the end of the syuzhet, however – and, a return to the beginning of the fabula; or, to be more specific, the start of a parallel fabula constructed from the syuzhet of the primary fabula – the audience, as well as Donnie himself, is privy to the true nature of the jet engine that would have (did) killed (kill) him: it has fallen from an airplane carrying his mother and sister. Thrown back in time

through a portal created by Donnie, the engine enters into a temporal paradoxical dance with Donnie that culminates in the construction of parallel plotline for Donnie and a parallel fabula for the film's viewer. At what ends up being the conclusion of the film, the final scene of the syuzhet is in reality only one small part of what the film calls the *correct universe*: the majority of the film, from when Donnie survives his own death and becomes magically empowered with superhuman gifts to when Donnie decides to sacrifice himself to save his mother Rose and his girlfriend Gretchen, takes place in what the film terms the *tangent universe*, but what could more aptly be called a *tangent fabula*. Working in parallel to the *correct* fabula of the film – correct only because the film itself paradoxically tells us so – this tangent fabula exists only within the mind of Donnie himself – a character thus subjectively defines the film for the viewer.

The paradoxical nature of these two contrasting fabula necessarily and constrain the existence of the fabula instantaneously. It is, at the same time, impossible *and* necessary for both timelines in *Donnie Darko* to exist. Without the existence of these fabula, which in fact occurs because we as members of the audience are capable of comprehending the paradox, neither would be complete, but they are mutually exclusive to each other: binary opposites in terms of fabula expectations.

This necessary dichotomy between the parallel fabula is made salient at the end of the film/syuzhet. After Donnie has traveled back in time and stopped himself from surviving the jet engine, his family huddles outside the smoldering ruins of their house, mourning him. Riding her bicycle down the block, Donnie's girlfriend in the tangent universe pulls up next to a boy near a crowd of spectators. "Who was that?" she asks, forcing the audience to consider that, in this timeline, Donnie neither met nor fell in love with her. After getting her answer, she looks

over to Donnie's mother. A hint of recognition flickers over both women's faces as they raise their hands and wave to each other.

It is that hint of recognition that connects this fabula to the other, paradoxically connecting two seemingly irreconcilable aspects of the plot. Thematically, Gretchen and Rose are linked throughout the film, as the two women become connected through Donnie's actions. During the film, the issue of Donnie's burgeoning sexuality conflates with his familial desire to save his mother. (Emerson writes about the Oedipal connection in *Donnie Darko*, which the movie illustrates quite liberally.) The jet engine that eventually (initially) destroys Donnie's life falls from the airplane in which his mother flies, causing (effecting) her death in the initial fabula. Meanwhile, in that first fabula, Gretchen eventually (inevitably) will be killed. Donnie eventually realizes that the only way to save the lives of both the women he loves will be to sacrifice himself and travel back in time to be killed by the engine – in effect, to prevent the very incident that precipitates his death. Donnie thus recognizes his life as a narrative, matches the twined syuzhets, and reconnects the fabula as a whole.

Thus, the wave and the recognition between the women both establish a connection that would not have been there previously had Donnie not returned to sacrifice himself. The first fabula of Donnie's survival links the two women, who instinctively understand their relationship through the parallel path of the *other* fabula. It is, in many ways, a multi-linear way of examining narrative: one that Landow has defined as hypertextual ("Critic"). In his article "What's a Critic to Do?" he examines how hypertext systems can "reuse particular bits of information, say, the identity of a correspondent or the mention of a repeated motif so that what would have appeared as a single note ... now becomes part of a network" (Landow, 23). In other words, by using a parallel fabula that must, by virtue of its own existence, paradoxically define

itself, *Donnie Darko* establishes a cinematic equivalent to “a network organization ... in which the reader encounters pockets of local organization” (Landow, “Critic,” 24). In this way, the film *Donnie Darko* mirrors, using the cinema, the techniques inherent to the web medium.

This process of “networking” a film develops out of both the viewer’s interpretation of the parallel fabula and Donnie’s onscreen negotiation of the different stories in his lives. In order to make sense of the confusing paradoxes of his own life, Donnie is forced to make narratives out of his life’s events. Initially, when Donnie first encounters Frank, the physical manifestation of his own future subconscious, he defines him, as his family and psychiatrist do, as a product of the narrative of his own mental illness. Yet, as Donnie gathers more material for the *plot* of his own life – the plot that we as viewers watch – he begins to suspect that Frank may fit into a different narrative altogether. By creating other possible narratives to his life when encountering other plot elements – the book *The Philosophy of Time Travel*, Roberta Sparrow, and more encounters with Frank – Donnie establishes the narrative that we as the audience understand as the film we are watching. It is not just that the viewer has created the narrative; it is that the narrative itself is watching Donnie create the narrative we watch.

In comprehensive and constructive relation to this lies the *Donnie Darko* website. The web offers a hypertextual medium for the viewer to construct stories out of the same plot elements as many of the characters in that story’s world do. The hypertextual qualities of the Internet allow for more variation in the experiences of the viewers: in Herman’s terms, this “storyworld” offers “other possible courses of development in the world in which narrated occurrences take place” (14).

Therefore, although the film *Donnie Darko* presents a multi-linear, parallel fabula as its form, the very structure of the medium of the web allows for this multi-linearity to exist

inherently. Problematically, however, this narrative is based on both linear form and multilinear form. The dual nature of the two linealities presents an intermediary narrative. The form the website for *Donnie Darko* takes is, in itself, an inherently linear one. Because the nature of the site, of any site, is multi-linear, as Landow points out in *Hypertext 2.0*, there are many ways that it can be structured, including one that “neither necessarily does away with all linearity nor removes formal coherence” (186-189). As Bolter asks, “Why should a writer be forced to produce a single, linear argument or an exclusive analysis of cause and effect, when the writing space allows a writer to entertain and present several lines of thought at once” (107)? In case of a website, the writing space is the location of the syuzhet. When first entering the webspace – perhaps, the digital equivalent of Herman’s storyworld¹ – the user of the site encounters a world at once similar to and different from the one experienced in the *Donnie Darko* film. Both texts, however, are linked. As Kathleen Welch states, “Intertextuality has particular resonance in our current state ... Electric rhetoric is utterly associative ... which has links and transitions that resonate more than they lineate” (106). This association links the two different media through both the texts and the fictional context, as we will see.

Of course, hypertext fiction can be just as varied as other fictions, as Landow states: “like fiction in print, that produced as linked lexias can take many forms” (2.0, 180). However, when faced with a web-based narrative, a narrative that may not have a beginning nor an ending; a narrative which has a causality affected by a user’s actions; a narrative without a fixed sequence; a narrative necessarily incomplete – how does the user interpreted this decidedly non-

¹ Actually, a problematic terminology appears here. From Landow: “Many hypertexts ... exemplify what Michael Innis, head of Inscape, Inc., has termed a storyworld. Storyworlds, which contain multiple narratives, demand active readers because they only disclose their stories in response to the reader’s actions” (2.0, 208). In other words, for Landow (and Innis), a website *is* a storyworld, as it consists of the interpretation of many narratives by the reader. For the purposes of this paper, however, I shall use “storyworld” in the Herman sense, that is, the spatiotemporal and temporal context in the text, as I feel that is the more universal definition and encompasses Innis’s, rather than the other way around.

Aristotelian plot (Landow, 2.0, 181)? The website for *Donnie Darko*, if not completely able to explain away these concepts, at least can show aspects of their applicability to narrative in general. For it is only through the (re-) interpretation of the elements within this hypertextual – actually, more precisely, hypermediated – narrative that the effects of narrative in a webspace can be seen.

This analysis of the narrative is affected by the relationship between the fabula and the syuzhet of the website. The decidedly different medium of the website, however, necessitates some changes to the interpretation of that relationship. No longer does the connection between the fabula and the syuzhet reside in the confines of the text: instead, it is now moved to a location between the text and the reader of that text. In other words, the reader herself becomes one of the foci for that relationship. At first glance, a website based on a film would appear to have the same fabula as the film. To this point, Dudley Andrew in his book chapter about adaptation, writes that there are “several possible modes of relation between the film and the text” and in content they take as their source, “the uniqueness of the original text” (98/99). While this is true for literature to film adaptation, upon closer examination, the website complicates this notion.

For the *Donnie Darko* website, unique fabula information is presented that both elucidates and complicates the filmic fabula, but is revealed in a linear progression. What this suggests is that to remain cogent within the filmic discourse, a website must subsume its own inherent formic aspects to the medium and instead must concentrate on presenting the new information in a linear manner. In other words, the website must emulate the film in order to properly tell additional tales.

When first entering the *Donnie Darko* website, the user is presented with three links: it appears, therefore, to offer three routes through the site. Each link, however, merely leads to

another *level* in the site – much like a videogame, the *Donnie Darko* website uses levels to structure the user's experience. To get from level to level, the user must have the correct password; each password is discovered during the previous levels' exploration. Therefore, the *only* link the user can follow initially is the first one: level one.

Clicking on that link leads to another page, titled "Everybody Dies Alone," a common phrase echoed through the film. Again, only one link is available. When clicked, however, this link opens a pop-up window that reveals new information that is not contained within the film. The popup frames a newspaper from the diegetic world, opened to the obituary page, which details the death of one of the main characters from the film. Not mentioned in the film, this death is thus textually unique to the website, and increases the fabula of the film itself. Importantly, without seeing the film, this piece of information would not register for the average viewer: it hardly matters if this character is dead because, having not seen the film, the character has no meaning. Thus, it is hard to conceive of the website as advertising, as it is incomprehensible and would not necessarily attract new viewers; instead, it appears that this new information exists solely to *add* to the fabula of the movie.

By extending the diegetic history in the film itself, this new piece of information increases the viewer's knowledge of the characters and plot in the discourse. If the fabula exists through the syuzhet, and is the viewer's attempt at reconstructing the events of the discourse into a chronological story, then by extending the information, the website necessarily increases the fabula. The user, by clicking on the links throughout the site, has increased her own understanding of the diegetic world of the film. The method of this presentation, the individual webpage, mirrors the filmic syuzhet in that it is the means of giving this information. When continuing to click through this first level of the website, each link follows a strictly linear path:

after exiting the initial popup newspaper, a new, single link appears. Clicking on that link leads to another paper, and another link. Another link leads to another popup, leads to another link.

The cycle finally ends and the user of the website has followed a completely linear path.

Although reading a narrative in a medium Landow describes as one in which

readers realize both that no true single narrative exists as the main or ‘right’ one and that reading traditional narrative has brainwashed them into expecting and demanding a single right answer and a single right storyline (2.0, 189)

the users instead find themselves indeed reading a *true single narrative* and a single *right* storyline. The rest of the website follows suit. Each new level, although promising the hope of interactivity and multi-linearity, instead presents a straightforward linear path for the reader to follow.

Interestingly, however, the third and final level of the *Donnie Darko* website differs in its presentation. When entering that level, the user is once again asked for the password from the previous level. When the page spreads open before the user, it reveals, once again, a single link. Clicking on this leads to a popup, which reads, “the following document may give you knowledge which you may not want to have prior to seeing the movie.” This is the first and only time the language of the website steps out of the diegesis of the film and directly addresses the user. Warning of the spoiler is unnecessary, however, as the information that is presented would be useless to one who had not seen the film. What is important on this page is not the text itself, but the navigation of the page. Once the spoiler information has been revealed to the user of the page, the page empties of links. No more navigation is possible and the user remains in a static location, unable to exit the page except by hitting the back button or exiting the Internet browser, in much the same way that a member of a film’s audience can, at the end of the film, either stay

to watch the film again or exit the theatre. The result of this stasis is to entirely inhibit the inherent multi-linearity of the web medium itself. By restricting the user to *no* linkage, the website denies its very convention. The website, converse to the film, uses the techniques of cinematic presentation.

In doing so, the promise of interactivity and of a “well-structured story [that] has the power to engage the users effectively in [this] meaningful interaction” has led into a static, non-interactive, and literally uni-linear webpage. (Mateas, 453) Although textually the site presents information that adds to the *Donnie Darko* fabula, it does so in a linear and chronological manner. The result of this is an experience online that mirrors that of watching a film. The film, in this respect, is more chronological diverse and multi-linear than the website.

But what does this mean for the relationship of films and websites as a whole? We have seen how the website can add information to the fabula of the film: by presenting *new* information in the diegetic history in the film, the website expands both the presentation of and the interpretation of the fabula. We have also seen how the form of the medium acts as the syuzhet, as it is the means for the presentation of the new information. By specifically limiting its own interactivity, the website thus substitutes its form for its function: it privileges the fabula of the film over its own syuzhet. The user of the website is severely limited from creating her *own* stories. If, as we have seen, the website offers the viewer a chance to meld the interactivity of a site to the viewing experience and allows for the creation of different stories, then by limiting the interactivity, the website limits the creation of alternate stories. This, in turn, gives the user the impression that the site itself is *part* of the film. For the *Donnie Darko* website, this impression is bolstered by both increased references to textual elements of the film, and the inclusion of new information that relates to the filmic world.

The relationship between a film and its website is a complicated interplay of interactivity and linearity. By limiting its interactivity, the website subsumes its own qualities as a medium. This, in turn, allows the user to experience the fabula on the website in a way that is structurally coherent with the film. By presenting the information in a cinematic way, the website limits the amount of freedom a user has to experience the information. Thus, the relationship between the film and its requisite website is one besmirched by plot. By being beholden to the plot of the film, the website sacrifices its own inherent interactivity and limits the actions of its user. The relationship between the two is demonstrated in the connections between *Donnie Darko* and www.donniedarko.com. Because the plot of *Donnie Darko* involves parallel fabula, it presents an opportunity to expand this notion in an interactive medium. The website, however, balances the instability of the film's parallel fabula by remaining static and linear to add information to these fabula. While the text of *Donnie Darko* presents an examination of the effects of time travel, parallelism, and paradox, the contextual relation with its website negates those effects.

The result of this creates a tension in the user. As websites become more popular destinations for narrative knowledge of film viewers, it becomes vitally important to examine this tension. On the one hand, the user wants the narrative coherence of a complete narrative. On the other hand, the user can only find this coherence through the (inherently incomplete) hypertextual medium of the website. This tension is indicative of the tension between the film and the website. In order to "understand" the "*Donnie Darko*" plot, the user must navigate through an intermediary narrative: made up of linear and multi-linear elements, this narrative is controlled by the user, but portrayed in an auteur-driven manner. The linear website moderates the divergent multilinear nature of the film, and in doing so, allows the narrative to emerge *from*

the amalgamation of the two. This intermediality allows the user to undertake a multilinear reading of a larger narrative: the user fills in the gaps of the narrative by completing the circuit between the website and the film. And in doing so, the user helps produce the meaning.

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