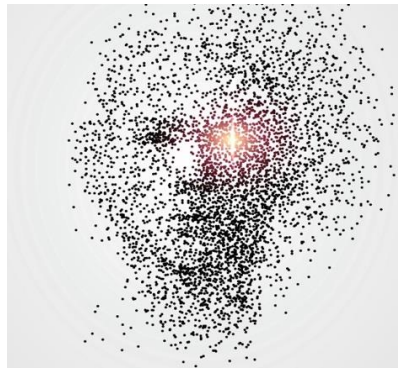


The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, April 8–9 2025  
Conference partner: The Games Studies Research Centre, The University of Silesia, Katowice

**Avatars, Assistants, Chatbots.**  
**New Fictional Characters in Contemporary Culture (From Literature to New Media)**



The Department of Historical Poetics and the Center for Digital Humanities at the Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences cordially invite you to the international conference “Avatars, Assistants, Chatbots. Fictional Characters in Contemporary Culture (From Literature to New Media)”.

The conference aims to reflect on the status of a technological fictional entity in various practices of contemporary multi-media culture. The collective imagination holds firmly cyborgs, androids, and xenomorphs. The interactive technological entities with anthropomorphic characteristics pose a new challenge for cultural, media, and literary reflection on fictional creations. The development of technology and the media revolution gave rise to the emergence of previously unprecedented classes of entities, starting with virtual assistants providing support in the use of digital devices, avatars as real people's identities, and ending with the famous Chat GTP.

They radically change the existing concepts of ontology and the identity of a fictional character, transform the definition of fiction, and complicate the relationship between the recipient of fiction and the character immersed in fiction. Moreover, the culture of

convergence has enabled the appearance of characters functioning in complementary stories across media (Thon 2016). Transfictionality (Saint-Gelais 2011) allows them to appear in various extensions of earlier fiction. We want to reflect on the ontology of these digital companions of today's participants in digital culture and their relationships with the protagonists of printed and digital literature to recognize potential similarities between them and fundamental differences. The principles and effects of various interactions with the technological "other" also seem to demand profound discussion, starting from using avatars in digital media, through the problems of digital translation, to the consequences of these interactions for communication theory (Meadows 2008).

Starting with a reflection on the protagonists of printed literature, we would like to consider their current position in other sign systems and other media (Eder, Jannidis, Schneider 2011), recognize their features, both dependent and independent of the medium, and indicate those elements of the cultural context that most influenced dynamic changes in the poetics and ontology of a fictional character in the past. We would also like to consider whether the tools of literary theory developed to describe a fictional character and coming from different research languages (Sławiński, Martuszevska 1983; Palmer 2008) can be helpful in contemporary reflection on new forms of beings that accompany us in contemporary multimedia, and interactive culture. In this context, another promising field of research is the newly established field of digital editing which focuses on the digital universes of texts and their characters (*Panorama literaturoznawstwa cyfrowego* 2023). What requires particular attention in this regard is whether changing the medium from print to digital affects the relationship between the editor and the text, the editor and the author, the protagonist of printed literature, and the digital character. To what extent can the categories of experience or empathy towards the protagonist, used in traditional literary research, be useful in analyses of digital narrative structures? How can they be related to the concept of a "user's experience" exploited in the design and analysis of websites and applications?

The birth of avatars made the mass users of digital technologies realize that their subjectivity is dispersed, can be multiplied, and individually created in the image of a fictional character. This raises ethical problems and new questions about the importance of embodiment for our identity and experience and the forms and course of interpersonal interactions in their cognitive and social nature (Taylor 2002). For researchers and creators of virtual worlds (media experts, Internet psychologists, video game designers, and computer scientists), a new area of research is the methods of individual and social building of relationships using avatars and the principles of the creation and functioning of shared virtual communities (Schroeder 2010). The avatar is also a handy tool for developing forms of team cooperation in an interactive environment or simulating problem-solving (Schroeder & Axelsson 2006).

One of the consequences of these uses of avatars is also the process of blurring the border between participants in fictional events, and the inhabitants of fictional worlds (Maj 2019) and their recipients/ users (in video games, digital literature, virtual or augmented reality, digital applications and utility programs). The process of becoming the protagonist of

a story often takes place in real time via streaming on social media, and it achieves global reach. Activating the recipient and including him in the world of narrative (in printed and digital literature (Winięcka 2020) and video games (Kłosiński 2018)) can be grasped in its fluctuating, historical forms (cf. various strategies of addressing the addressee in literary communication, narrative genres and forms based on the implied presence of the listener). Another area of reflection may be the analysis of techniques for breaking the fourth wall (Brown 2013) and metaleptic procedures (Hanebeck 2017), aimed at questioning the division of the roles of the fictional character and the recipient of fiction (in literature and the visual arts). Worth considering are also experiments with the embodiment of the recipient as a category in both the construction of a multimedia text and the environment of its reception.

Literary scholars, media scholars, designers, and video game researchers interested in the practices and forms of multimedia digital culture are kindly invited to discuss these issues of contemporary culture.

Special guests include:

prof. Alice Bell (Sheffield Hallam University)  
prof. Jan-Noël Thon (Universität Osnabrück)  
dr hab. Michał Kłosiński (Uniwersytet Śląski)

#### **Selected References:**

- Brown T. (2013). *Breaking the Fourth Wall. Direct Address in the Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Eder, J. Jannidis, F., Schneider, R. (eds.) (2011). *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter.
- Hanebeck, J. (2017). *Understanding Metalepsis: The Hermeneutics of Narrative Transgression*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.
- Keen, S., (2007). *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kłosiński M. (2018). *Hermeneutyka gier wideo. Interpretacja, immersja, utopia*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN.
- Łebkowska A., (2009). *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku*. Kraków: Universitas.
- Maj K.M., (2019). *Światotwórczość w fantastyce. Od przedstawienia do zamieszkiwania*. Kraków: Universitas.
- Meadows, M. (2008). I, Avatar. *The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life*. New Riders.
- Palmer A. (2008). *Fictional Minds*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Panorama literaturoznawstwa cyfrowego* <https://nplp.pl/kolekcja/panorama-literaturoznawstwa-cyfrowego/> (access: 01.2024).
- Płuciennik J. (2002). *Literackie identyfikacje i oddźwięki. Poetyka a empatia*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo UŁ.
- Saint-Gelais, R. (2011). *Fictions transfuges. La transfictionnalité et ses enjeux*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Schroeder, R., A.-S., Axelsson (eds.) (2006). *Avatars at Work and Play. Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Schroeder, R., (2010). *Being There Together. Social Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sławiński, J., Martuszevska A., (red.) (1983). *Autor – podmiot literacki – bohater*. Wrocław: Ossolineum.

Taylor T. L., (2002). *Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds*. In: R. Schroeder (ed.) *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. London: Springer, pp. 40-62.

Thon, J.-N. (2016). *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Winiecka E. (2020). *Poszerzanie pola literackiego. Studia o literackości w Internecie*. Kraków: Universitas.

### **Proposed areas of analysis:**

New identity representation: threats and opportunities.

New social practices mediated by the use of avatars.

Problems of new identity: multiplicity, variability, dependence on the medium, relation to the concept of subjectivity and identity in late modernity and postmodernity.

Issues of the recipient's agency in various arts and practices.

Problems of interactivity and functioning in a virtual community in various arts and practices

Reception of virtual literature and games: immersion in a new body.

New forms of immersion: inhabiting someone else's body as a new type of the recipient's/user's experience, user-avatar relationship.

Possible theories for studying new fictional entities.

Principles and effects of interaction with technological entities and the tasks of a translator in the era of the media revolution: translators' ethics and digital technologies.

Digital editing and text interactivity (recipient as co-creator, text form as a set of potentialities; undefined places vs. linking?).

To what extent are literary categories useful for describing the phenomena of digital space and the relationships between recipient – text – character – author/editor?

### **Planned sections:**

1. The status of fictional entities in contemporary literary and cultural studies. The main topic will be the issues of status, subjectivity, and identity of fictional entities, which are increasingly present in the multimedia practices of contemporary culture. One of the main subjects of reflection will be the changing and expanding concept of fiction; we will also focus on the connections between digital entities and the heroes of traditional print culture.
2. Interactions with the technological "Other". The section will be devoted to an analysis of interactions with digital fictional entities. We will consider various forms of

immersion, interactivity of texts, and the use of technological entities for professional activities in the field of culture (e.g., in the work of a translator and digital text editor).

3. The tradition of literary and cultural studies focusing on fictional entities. The section concerns the possibility of using previously developed literary and cultural studies tools (primarily related to the description of the protagonist) to study contemporary fictional entities in various media. We want to consider the justification for reaching for such traditional categories known to literary studies as identity, fiction, empathy, and experience. The subject of the reflection will be the development of new transmedia tools of description, which could prove complementary to the concepts, typologies, and methodologies used so far in the humanities.
4. Subjectivity vs. digital technologies. A section devoted to the problems of the variable, dispersed, multiplied subjectivity of the user of digital media. These problems are related to the issue of identity (mediated, for example, through avatars) and techniques for including the recipient in a fictional world. We want to consider issues related to the creation of interpersonal and social relations in contemporary multimedia reality. The subject of consideration will be ethical issues – the benefits and threats resulting from free access to tools for creating and using avatars in global social contacts.

Conference program board:

prof. Sandrine Sorlin (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3)

dr hab. Michał Kłosiński (Uniwersytet Śląski)

dr hab. Bartłomiej Szleszyński (Instytut Badań Literackich)

Conference organizing committee:

dr hab. Tamara Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz

dr Marta Bukowiecka

dr hab. Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik

dr hab. Beata Śniecikowska

Conference secretary:

dr hab. Andrzej Karcz

Please send your proposals to the following address [awatary@ibl.waw.pl](mailto:awatary@ibl.waw.pl) by January 31, 2025.

Please send the title of your paper, abstract (max. 200 words), and affiliation. We will send you confirmation of your attendance by February 28, 2025.

Conference fee: PLN 500.

Conference languages: Polish/English