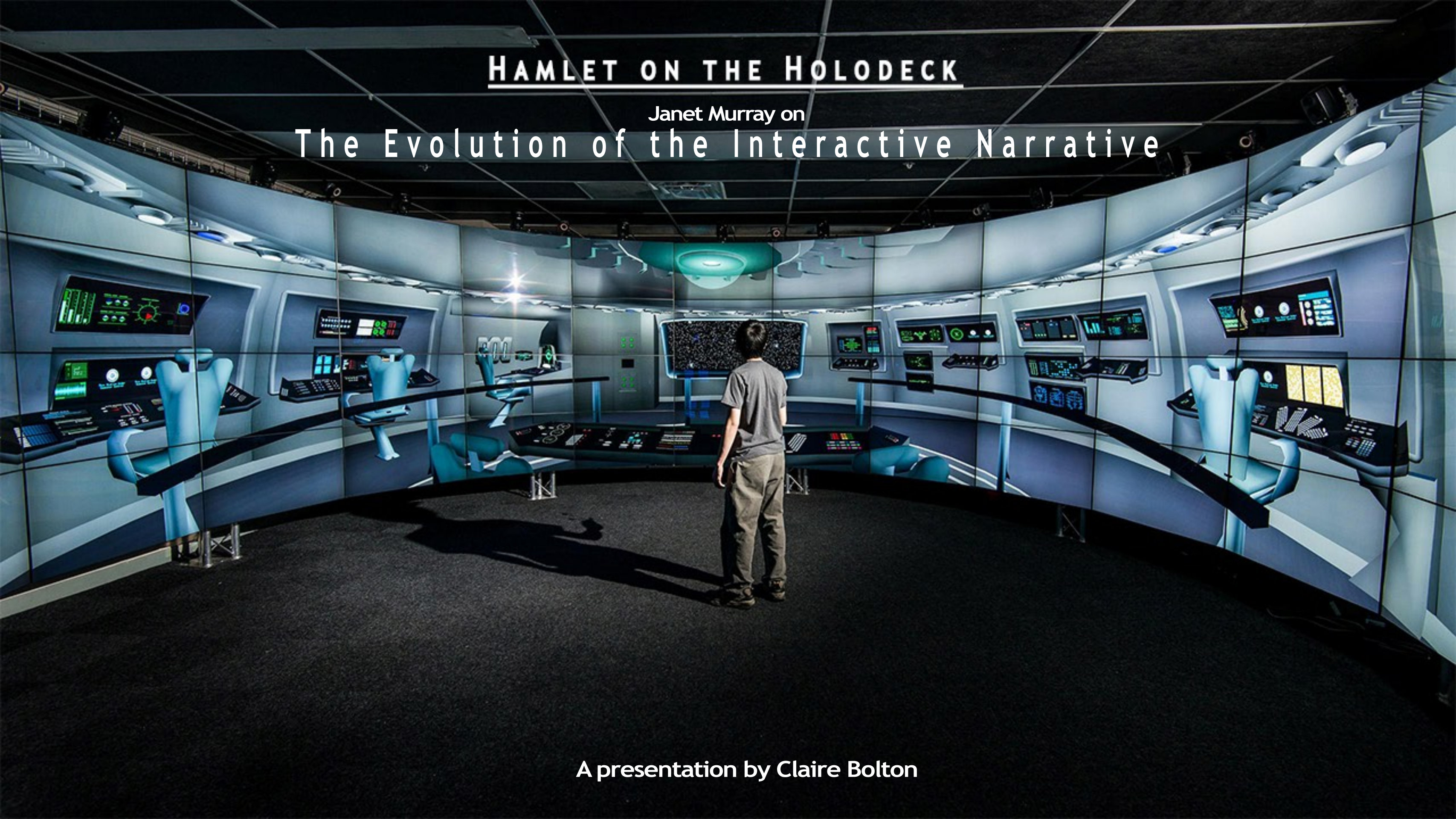# Hamlet on the Holodeck

Janet Murray on

The Evolution of the Interactive Narrative

A presentation by Claire Bolton

Janet Murray

Professor in the School of Literature, Media and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology

Author of "Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace"

Examined the relationships between artificial intelligence, interactivity and digital media

Used the "Holodeck" from Star Trek as an example of the possibilities of

The Multiform Story
-or-
Interactive Narrative

"Hamlet on the Holodeck"

Janet Murray's most well-known work, "Hamlet on the Holodeck" was
a book that asked whether or not computers can be used for expressive narrative forms.

Novels and films have already been established as legitimate means of narrative expression.
Printing technology allowed for the birth of the novel,
and photography/film allowed for the birth of the movie.
What narrative forms will computer technologies bring about?

In "Hamlet on the Holodeck", Janet Murray used the example of the "holodeck" from the Star Trek franchise, a piece of advanced technology used for highly realistic simulations of historical events and fictional works to be experienced through high fidelity virtual immersion (virtual reality).

Her use of it in her book was meant to serve as example of the ways immersive technology can impact us and cause us to lose ourselves in simulated reality.

The "Multiform Story"

Janet Murray's concept of the "Multiform Story":

"A written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions"

When the audience is allowed to glimpse into other possible outcomes, even in stories that are essentially linear

In other words...

- Branching Paths -

The "Active Audience"

Auidence participation has become increasingly more important in the realm of digital media

Fandoms, conventions, fansites, cosplayers, forums, roleplaying, fanfiction, live theater, etc.

Media creations cease to belong solely to their creators

What is an "Interactive Narrative"?

An "interactive narrative" is one in which the audience can influence a result

The most popular form of the "interactive narrative" today is the Video Game…
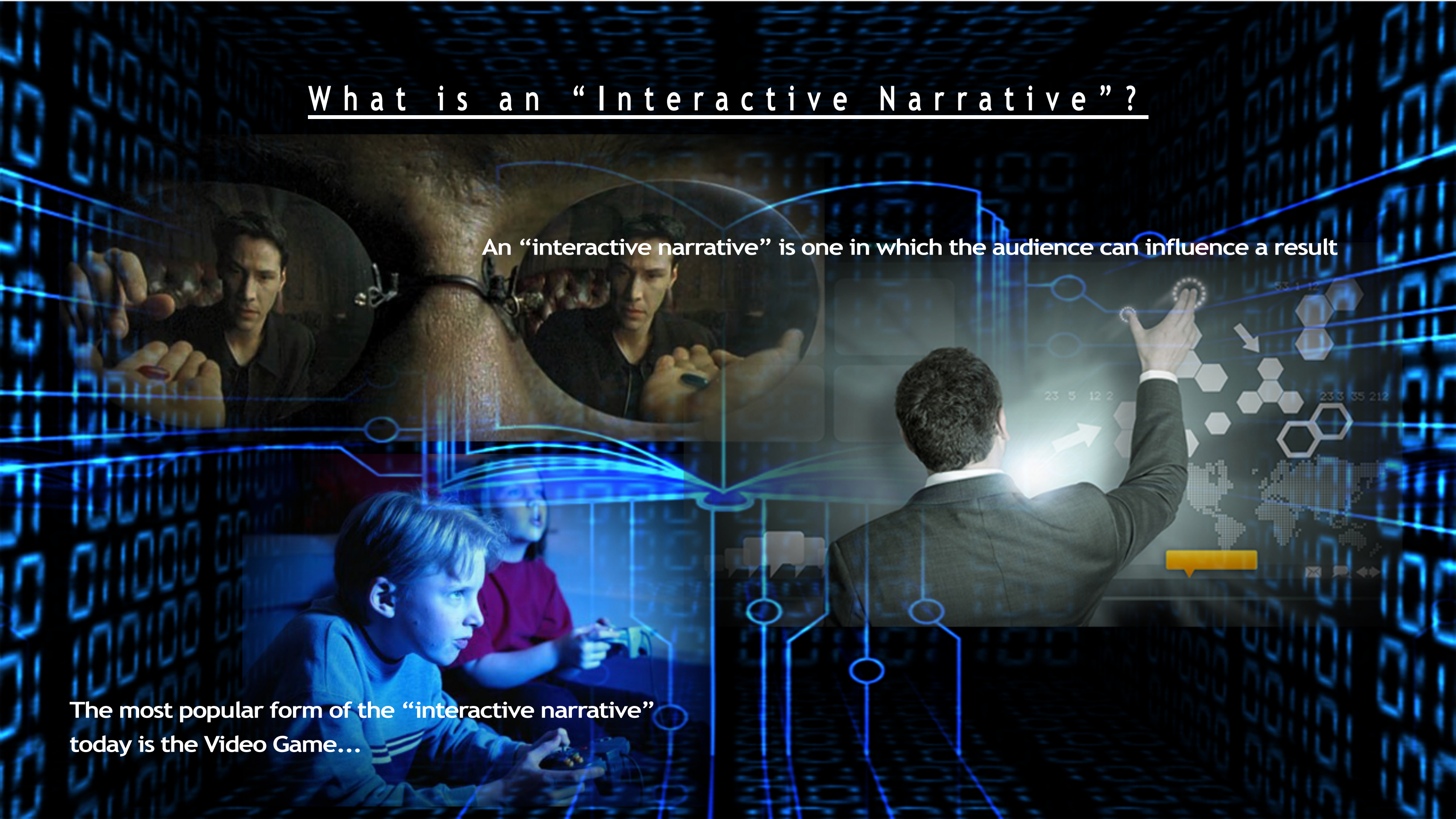
What began as games being played with pen and paper became an industry

Games about heroes,
villains,
adventure,
action,
comedy,
romance,
horror

Games telling stories that were simple,
complex,
sad,
strange,
amusing,
offensive,
benign

And technology has grown and evolved to make
virtual representations of our reality seem
more and more real

Visions of the Future:
UTOPIA -vs- DYSTOPIA

Many works of science fiction center around new technologies…

with some interpretations offering a positive outlook (utopia)…

…and others a more pessimistic one (dystopia).

A utopian future is one where societal perfection has been attained…

…a dystopian future is the opposite; everything has gone to ruin:
the land, the economy, the people.

U t o p i a

A future where all our needs our met…

All citizens are happy

All needs are met

And technology serves our best interests

Sadly, a utopia is an unrealistic expectation of the future…

Dystopia

A future where human life has lost its value...

Citizens live in despair

Corporations and totalitarian regimes rule

And technology exists to enforce that rule

Fortunately, a dystopia is also an unrealistic expectation of the future.
Humanity would not allow for such a state to exist.

Interactive Media
in the
Future

The utopian vision of oncoming digital media is a belief in universal benefit.

The dystopian vision of oncoming digital media is one of paranoid fear.

The future, however, is not so easy to predict...

In order to better understand where technology is heading, we should examine where it is currently at.

So, let's examine the pros and cons of interactive media...

The Strength of an Interactive Medium

STELLAR PATROL: SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT FORCE
But even your expert technical training
won't save you now.

PLANETFALL

ATARI ST   INFOCOM

In Janet Murray's "Hamlet on the Holodeck", she mentions playing the 1983 text adventure game "Planetfall" and experiencing sadness with the death of a character.

This is but one of countless examples of interactive media eliciting empathic responses in audiences.
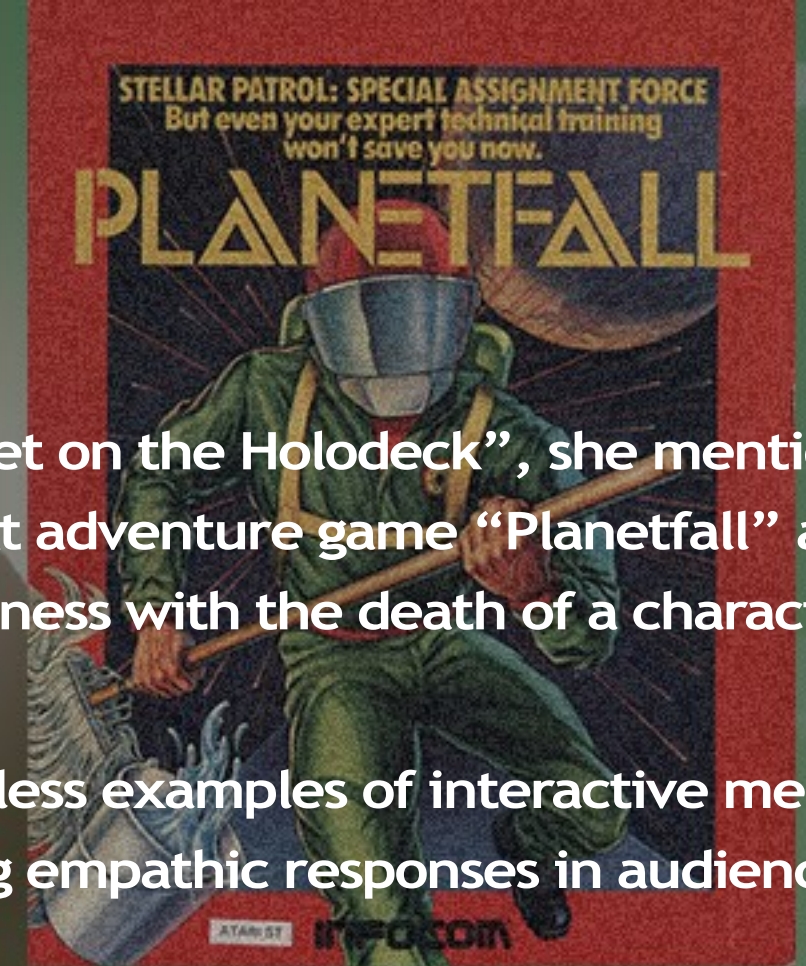
Apart from the physical benefits such as improved motor skills, eye-hand coordination, reaction speeds, spatial intelligence, etc. there are the social benefits of increased interaction between players, be they friends or family members.

Each of these characters represents a living, breathing human player. Bonds between participants can be formed even within the confines of a digital interactive experience.

The Dark Side

However, Janet Murray also realized that games could result in the casual acceptance of violence.

In Janet Murray's case, it came about while playing "Mad Dog McCree", an action game based around gunning down countless foes.

In Janet Murray's case, she was able to realize she had unknowingly been drawn in by the experience.

While Janet was not persuaded to seek similar experiences, others might be more inclined to.

She argues for the "transparency" of all successful story-telling technologies: the loss of consciousness of the medium, where we lose ourselves in the experience.

The argument can be made that, even if violence in games does not provoke violence, it may still channel the aggression of the immersed player.

There is also the concern over the military and gun fetishization present throughout the industry, not to mention the problems with sexism, racism, etc.

The Road Ahead

In spite of the assumptions being made, both utopian and dystopian,
about emerging technologies, I predicct that, in the end, interactive
media will serve to benefit humanity in whatever form it takes.

As we explore the possibilities in this new world of media, new themes
will be explored, new issues will arise, and new triumphs will be attained.

It is easy to assume the best or the worst of things to come,
but the only way to know for certain is to go forth.
As frightening and new as this new approach to creativity is,
it is also just as exciting.

As Janet Murray said,
"We are on the brink of a historic convergence,"
and I am ready for the journey.