



Prompt, platform, and plot: Human–AI co-authorship and narrative agency in algorithmic storytelling

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence has altered narrative production by placing text generation inside an interactive exchange between a human user and a computational system. Unlike conventional digital texts, AI-generated stories can be modified through conversational prompts, revised through successive iterations, and shaped by a user who may function simultaneously as reader, editor, director, and co-producer. This paper examines the problem of narrative agency in such human–AI collaborations. It asks: who controls a story when the human supplies instructions but the machine supplies linguistic realization? Drawing on Roland Barthes’s critique of authorial authority, Gérard Genette’s account of narrative discourse, Marie-Laure Ryan’s work on interactivity and digital narrative, and N. Katherine Hayles’s account of human–machine relations, the paper argues that generative storytelling is best understood as a distributed narrative process rather than a simple transfer of authorship from human to machine. The paper proposes a four-level model of co-authorship—intention, prompting, generation, and curation—and demonstrates how each level contributes differently to narrative form. It further distinguishes computational generation from narrative agency, since producing textual sequences is not identical to deciding their cultural purpose. The study concludes that AI-mediated storytelling expands the concept of the author into a networked function while retaining an important role for human selection, interpretation, and responsibility.

Keywords: Generative AI, authorship, narrative agency, co-authorship, digital narrative, algorithmic storytelling

Introduction

The traditional literary model begins with a writer who conceives a story, composes it, revises it, and presents it to readers. Even when literary theory challenges the stability of the author, the figure of the writer remains an important organizing category for the production and reception of narrative. Generative artificial intelligence complicates this model because a user can now describe a desired story in ordinary language and receive a developed narrative from a computational system. The user may then request changes, ask for alternative endings, modify characters, reject passages, or combine several outputs. Narrative production becomes conversational and iterative.

This situation creates a distinctive narratological problem. The question is not simply whether artificial intelligence should be called an author. A more useful question concerns how narrative agency is distributed across the process of generation. The human may establish the intention, but the system generates sentences that the human did not individually formulate. The system may produce an unexpected plot development, but the human may decide whether that development remains in the final story. The final narrative is therefore the result of several operations rather than a single act of composition.

Marie-Laure Ryan’s studies of digital narrative provide an important foundation for this discussion because they distinguish between forms of textuality based on the degree to which users can participate in narrative construction. Generative AI intensifies this participatory condition: the user does not merely navigate a pre-existing story but can request new narrative material. Yet generation alone should not be equated with agency. This paper proposes that human–AI storytelling should be analysed through four connected levels: intention, prompting, generation, and

curation. The argument is that authorship in AI-mediated narrative is becoming distributed, but human agency remains particularly important at the levels of purpose, selection, and cultural framing.

From Author to Narrative Function

Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” challenged the assumption that the meaning of a literary text can be secured by recovering the author’s intention. Barthes shifts attention from the author as origin toward the text and its plurality of cultural meanings. This argument becomes newly relevant in the context of generative AI, but it should not be applied mechanically. An AI system is not simply a new version of Barthes’s reader. It is a computational system that produces linguistic sequences according to learned patterns and the immediate conditions of interaction.

The distinction matters because the generated text may lack a singular intentional consciousness while still possessing recognizable narrative structure. A system can produce a first-person narrator, manipulate chronology, establish suspense, and create symbolic motifs without possessing a human-like purpose behind these choices. Consequently, narrative form and authorial intention must be separated analytically.

Gérard Genette’s narratology is useful here because it encourages attention to the organization of narrative discourse: order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice. These categories can be applied to AI-generated texts regardless of whether the producing agent is human or computational. The system may move backward through time, compress years into a paragraph, repeat an event from different perspectives, or shift focalization between characters. The narratological effect exists at the level of the text even when the process that produced it differs from conventional writing.

The Four Levels of Human–AI Co-Authorship

The first level is intention. Before a story is generated, a human user usually has some purpose, even if that purpose is vague. The user may want a horror story, a myth-inspired science-fiction narrative, a children's tale, or an experimental first-person monologue. Intention establishes the communicative direction of the interaction.

The second level is prompting. The prompt translates intention into linguistic instructions. Prompting can specify genre, setting, characters, tone, point of view, narrative length, historical period, or thematic concerns. It can also include negative constraints, such as avoiding a particular ending or changing a character's role. The prompt is therefore not merely a request; it functions as a preliminary narrative design document.

The third level is generation. Here the computational system produces the actual linguistic material. This is the stage that most visibly differentiates generative AI from ordinary digital tools. The system may produce sentences, scenes, dialogue, descriptions, and plot developments that the user did not explicitly write. Generation introduces an element of unpredictability because the user cannot determine every sentence in advance.

The fourth level is curation. The user evaluates the output, selects portions, requests revisions, combines alternatives, removes unwanted passages, and may rewrite the final text. Curation is narratively significant because it converts a large field of possible outputs into one communicative artifact. The final story therefore reflects not only generation but also decisions about what counts as successful narrative.

Prompting as Narrative Design

Prompting deserves special attention because it occupies an intermediate position between literary planning and conversation. A prompt can be as minimal as "write a story about a city where memories are traded" or as elaborate as a multi-paragraph specification containing characters, chronology, themes, narrative voice, and structural constraints.

The difference between these prompts demonstrates that human influence does not disappear when generation is delegated. A detailed prompt can establish a storyworld before any sentence is generated. It can determine the character relationships, central conflict, and desired emotional trajectory. The machine then operates within the possibilities opened by the prompt.

At the same time, prompting is not equivalent to writing a conventional manuscript. A prompt establishes conditions rather than necessarily determining the exact verbal realization. This distinction can be described as the difference between narrative architecture and textual execution. In AI-mediated storytelling, the human often controls more of the architecture while the system contributes to execution.

This division also explains why a generated narrative can surprise its user. Suppose a user prompts an AI to write about a researcher who discovers an algorithm capable of predicting dreams. The user may expect a technological thriller, but the system may introduce a secondary character, alter the moral conflict, or produce an ending in which the researcher becomes dependent on the algorithm. The unexpected element is not necessarily evidence of independent agency. It can instead be understood as the

productive uncertainty of a generative system operating within a constrained prompt.

Generation without Intention

The distinction between generation and intention is central. A machine can generate a sentence that functions as irony without intending to be ironic. It can produce a tragic ending without experiencing tragedy. It can construct a symbolic object without possessing a conscious symbolic purpose. Literary interpretation can therefore analyse the generated text without assuming that the system has the same kind of intentionality as a human author.

This distinction is important for narratology because narrative agency has several dimensions. There is agency over textual production, agency over plot decisions, agency over communicative purpose, and agency over reception. A generative system may have a role in textual production, but it does not follow that it possesses the full range of agency associated with a human participant in cultural communication.

Ryan's work on interactivity helps clarify this problem. Digital narrative can allow users to affect the presentation or progression of a story, but degrees of interactivity differ. Generative AI introduces another possibility: the user can request new narrative material in response to previous output. The interaction is therefore recursive. The user reads, responds, and generates again.

The resulting process can be represented as:

Human intention → prompt → machine generation → human reading → revision request → new generation → human curation.

The important feature of this sequence is its circularity. The user's later prompt is influenced by the machine's earlier output. The machine therefore changes the conditions under which the human makes subsequent narrative decisions. Agency is distributed through interaction rather than simply divided into "human" and "machine."

Narrative Voice in AI-Generated Storytelling

Voice offers a particularly revealing example. A user can ask an AI system to produce a story in the first person, third-person limited, unreliable narration, or multiple perspectives. The resulting text may contain a convincing narrative voice. Yet the voice is constructed through linguistic patterns rather than through a stable biographical speaker.

This does not make the voice aesthetically irrelevant. Readers respond to the voice as part of the narrative artifact. A first-person AI-generated narrator can create intimacy, uncertainty, or irony just as a human-written narrator can. The difference lies in the production process.

Genette's distinction between who speaks and who sees is useful here. A generated story can establish a narrator and focalizer through textual choices. The researcher's task is to analyse these choices rather than to assume that the computational system itself occupies the narrator's position. The machine produces discourse; the narrative text organizes that discourse into a speaking position.

This distinction also prevents an overly simplistic claim that AI has "found its voice." What appears as machine voice is better understood as a generated narrative effect. The voice can be consistent, unstable, persuasive, or contradictory, but

its literary function is located in the text and interaction rather than in an assumed machine personality.

Curation and the Return of Human Agency

If generation is the most visible feature of AI storytelling, curation may be the least discussed. Yet it is central to the final narrative. A user may receive five possible endings and select one. Another user may combine the first half of one output with the ending of another. A third may substantially rewrite the generated text. These activities transform raw generation into a communicative artifact.

Curation also introduces responsibility. A user who publishes an AI-generated story chooses to place that story before an audience. The cultural meaning of the story is shaped by its framing, editing, title, description, and platform of circulation. In this sense, authorship cannot be reduced to the moment when sentences are generated.

The concept of distributed authorship is therefore more useful than the simple binary of human author versus machine author. Distributed authorship does not mean that every participant contributes equally. It means that different agents and processes perform different functions. The user may provide intention and selection; the system may provide linguistic expansion and variation; the platform may determine interface conditions and circulation; readers may complete the process through interpretation.

Platform Conditions and Algorithmic Narrative

AI-generated narrative also exists within platforms. The interface determines how prompts are entered, how outputs are displayed, how conversations are retained, and how users can request revisions. These conditions influence the narrative process. A conversational interface encourages iterative storytelling because users can immediately respond to a generated passage.

This is consistent with broader developments in digital narrative identified by Ryan. Digital media have increasingly shifted attention from fixed textual objects toward processes involving interaction and participation. Generative systems extend this tendency by making the production of textual content itself responsive.

The platform therefore becomes part of the narrative environment. The story is not produced only by “the AI.” It is produced through an arrangement involving model architecture, interface design, prompt conventions, user decisions, and circulation mechanisms. A narratology adequate to AI-generated narrative must consequently consider not only textual form but also the conditions under which the text comes into being.

Implications for Literary Studies

The emergence of AI-generated narrative does not make traditional narratology obsolete. On the contrary, narratological concepts become tools for distinguishing what changes from what remains. Narrative voice, focalization, temporal order, character construction, repetition, and plot can still be analysed. What changes is the production history behind the text.

This creates opportunities for comparative research. Scholars can examine a human-written story and an AI-generated story based on the same narrative premise. They can compare plot structure, characterization, metaphor, narrative voice, and temporal organization. They can also document the prompts and revisions that produced the AI

version. Such a method makes the production process part of the archive.

The approach is especially valuable for doctoral research because it moves beyond the vague question of whether AI is creative. Creativity is not a single measurable property. Literary scholarship can instead examine what kinds of narrative operations AI systems perform, how users guide those operations, and how readers interpret the resulting texts.

Conclusion

Generative AI changes narrative production by making generation interactive, iterative, and visibly distributed. The central question is therefore not whether the machine should simply replace the author but how authorship functions when narrative production is shared across human intention, prompting, computational generation, and human curation.

The four-level model proposed here—intention, prompting, generation, and curation—offers a way to describe this process without collapsing the roles of human and machine. Intention establishes purpose; prompting translates purpose into narrative instructions; generation expands those instructions into textual possibilities; and curation determines which possibilities become part of a final narrative artifact.

AI-generated storytelling consequently represents neither the complete disappearance of the author nor the uncomplicated birth of a machine author. It represents a transformation in the organization of narrative agency. The human becomes less exclusively the producer of every sentence and more visibly a designer, selector, editor, and interpreter. The machine becomes a generative participant without necessarily becoming an intentional cultural subject. Such a transformation invites narratology to move from the study of texts alone toward the study of narrative processes. In algorithmic storytelling, the story is not only the final sequence of words. It is also the chain of prompts, responses, revisions, selections, and interpretations through which that sequence emerges. The future of narrative may therefore be understood not as a contest between human and machine authorship, but as an expanding field of hybrid narrative practices in which agency is distributed and continually renegotiated.

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