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Arabic Interactive Literature and Criticism: Transformations of Creativity and Issues of Critical Practice

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Abstract

The field of literature is witnessing significant developments at various levels and in different domains, particularly in language and literary criticism. One of the major characteristics of this development is the shift in scholarly research from an exclusive focus on the text and its author toward greater attention to the recipient of the text, thereby granting the reader a central role in various literary studies. Alongside this shift, the literary text itself has undergone significant transformation, moving from the traditional printed text to the modern digital text, accompanied by a parallel development in the field of literary criticism. A critic of the printed text can no longer adopt the same approaches and rules when analyzing and interpreting a digital text. This situation requires Arab critics to develop and adopt specialized tools that enable them to engage with this form of literary production in its various genres and forms, including poetry and prose (novels, plays, short stories, etc.). This raises the following question: How can we read the digital text by drawing upon the various theories offered by contemporary literary criticism?

Keywords: Interactive Literature, Interactive Criticism, Reception, Reading.

Introduction

Modern literary studies have witnessed a transformation in the status and role of the elements involved in the interactive process, shifting from the traditional dyad of author–text toward an emphasis on the interaction between two other poles, as adopted by the German School of Constance, particularly through its two prominent scholars, Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss: text–reader.

At the same time, the literary text itself has not remained static; rather, it has undergone various transformations, moving from oral transmission to writing and printing. It subsequently kept pace with technological developments in the modern era, becoming virtual literature available on the World Wide Web and displayed on electronic devices such as computers and mobile phones. As a result, a new literary genre emerged, distinct from what had previously existed, and was referred to as interactive literature. Correspondingly, a new form of criticism emerged, commonly known as interactive criticism. In this paper, we seek to explore the nature of this form of literature, the ways in which it can be critically approached, and the position occupied by the recipient within it.

1. Interactive Literature: Meanings and Concepts

This type of literature has been characterized by considerable diversity and variation in the terminology used to designate it. This has resulted in a degree of terminological inconsistency in referring to this literary genre, which encompasses every narrative or poetic form produced through a computer and based fundamentally on an electronic medium. The multiplicity of terms employed by Western and Arab researchers has made it difficult for scholars to establish a precise definition of this type of literature.

Jamil Hamdaoui has highlighted this terminological diversity in his book *Digital Literature between Theory and Practice*, identifying several terms, including: digital literature, interactive literature, virtual literature, computer literature, hypertext, web literature, Facebook writing, screen literature, and other related terms.ⁱ

Despite this diversity and multiplicity of terminology, these terms do not alter the essential nature of this literary genre, namely, its dependence on an electronic medium. In this context, we will employ the terms most commonly used among Arab researchers, namely digital literature, interactive literature, and hypertextual or hyperlinked literature. Arab scholars have explored these concepts in an attempt to define them. Among the most notable definitions is the following:

Jamil Hamdaoui defines digital literature as follows: "It is the narrative, poetic, or dramatic literature that employs information technology in writing and creative production. In other words, it makes use of a computer or an electronic device to write a text or a creative work. Digital literature, therefore, is literature that employs media, computers, or electronic devices and transforms the literary text into digital, automated, and computational worlds."ⁱⁱ

As for Fatima Berrichi, she defines interactive literature as follows: "Literature that employs the resources of modern technology to present a new literary genre that combines literariness and electronic technology, and which can only be accessed by its recipient through an electronic medium, namely, the blue screen."ⁱⁱⁱ

Saeed Yaktine, on the other hand, defines hypertext as follows: "A collection of creative works (with literature being one of the most prominent among them) that emerged through the use of computers and did not exist before, or that developed from older forms but assumed new modes of production and reception with the advent of computers."^{iv}

In the foregoing definitions of digital literature, we have presented three different definitions proposed by three different scholars, each of whom uses a different designation. Thus, it is referred to as digital literature by Jamil Hamdaoui, interactive literature by Fatima Berrichi, whereas Saeed Yaktine prefers to call it hypertext. Although there is a difference in terminology, there is a common and unified understanding in their definitions: digital literature, in their view, encompasses all literary works, regardless of their genre—poetry, narrative, or drama—presented through an electronic medium without which they cannot be produced or accessed, namely, the computer. In this sense, the medium has shifted from paper to electronic form while retaining its literary character.

Accordingly, this type of literature can be described as a genre that "was born in the womb of technology; therefore, it is described as technological literature or electronic literature. It may also be referred to as the techno-literary genre, since it could not have emerged independently of the technology that provides it with the software specifically designed for its composition. In the absence of such software, it is at least necessary to make use of the features provided by the creation of an electronic text based on links."^v

The differences in terminology have created considerable confusion among researchers regarding the nature of this literary form. Some have regarded all these terms as different designations for the same subject, whereas others have argued that there are subtle distinctions between these terms and the concepts they denote. This is particularly evident in the approaches adopted by Jamil Hamdaoui and Fatima Berrichi, who reviewed the various terms and highlighted the subtle distinctions between them. Among the most prominent of these terms are the following:

Electronic Literature (La littérature électronique): Researchers distinguish between the digital poem and the electronic poem. They argue that "the former is subject to precise computer programming and complex and sophisticated software engineering, whereas the latter is associated with direct and superficial electronic publishing."^{vi} Accordingly, electronic literature is given this designation in reference to the medium through which it is presented, employing various channels for conveying its messages, such as emails, messages, Flash, and electronic mail.

Digital literature, however, differs from electronic literature in that it is a product of media computing, subject to digital programming, and compatible with the internal architecture of the computer. Digital literature is therefore regarded as an internally generated media product, whereas electronic literature is considered an externally generated media product.^{vii}

Based on the foregoing, it can be argued that electronic literature is essentially composed of texts or messages read on computer screens in much the same way that printed texts are read in magazines and books. Digital literature, by contrast, refers to literary works presented on computers through the use of various digital software and technologies, including sound, images, colors, and different forms of multimedia.

Interactive Literature (Littérature interactive): Jamil Hamdaoui defines interactive literature as "literature that is concerned with the interactive relationship that emerges between the observer and the text at the levels of browsing, reception, and acceptance. This relationship is governed by a set of fundamental interactive elements, namely: text, sound, image, movement, the recipient, and the computer, with particular emphasis on internal interactivity (the relationship between textual links) and external interactivity (the combination of the creator and the recipient). In other words, interactive literature is that which brings together the activity of the writer or narrator and that of the recipient"^{viii}. According to this definition, interaction is manifested in its highest form, as both the creator of the text and its recipient participate in its production through the use of technological media that have a significant impact on this interactive process. The most prominent feature of this interaction is the considerable space granted to the recipient to reproduce the text, a space that may even exceed that available to the creator of the interactive text himself. "This literature cannot be considered interactive unless the recipient is given a space equivalent to, or greater than, that of the original creator of the text"^{ix}

Hypertext or Hyperlinked Literature: This is a term adopted by Said Yaktine in his discussion of digital literature. By hyperlinked or hypertextual literature, we mean that "the literary text is interconnected with a set of other interactive texts that are constituted through their mechanical, technical, informational, visual, and auditory dimensions" According to ^x. Said Yaktine's perspective, this type of literature is realized through the computer and is characterized by its non-linear

nature, as it consists of a set of nodes or fragments interconnected through visible links. This type of text allows the reader to move from one piece of information to another by activating the links through which the linear dimension of reading is transcended, since the reader navigates the text according to the path of their choice. The use of this type of text expanded with the emergence of the Internet and compact discs containing entertainment or educational programs^{xi}

The definitions and subtle distinctions between the aforementioned terms can be summarized as follows: "Digital literature and electronic literature are one and the same, while hypertext is part of the technology of both digital and electronic literature. The absence of hypertextuality does not negate the fact that a work is digital or electronic. Moreover, 'interactive literature' truly acquires its interactive character when the reader participates not merely in appreciating the work, but also in being given the opportunity to produce something from it and to critique it".^{xii}

1. Interactive Criticism and Its Relationship to Contemporary Critical Theories

After discussing the term interactive literature from its theoretical perspective, we encounter another term from the critical perspective, namely interactive criticism. This is a compound term combining criticism and interaction, as it brings together the critical process, regardless of its various theoretical and methodological references, and the interactive text in its genuine sense.

This raises several questions concerning this form of criticism and the choice of its terminology. Is interactive criticism merely a critical practice that does not differ from traditional print-based criticism, or does it possess a distinctive interactive dimension? Is it appropriate to extend the term "criticism" to this interactive practice? These questions, among others, remain central to the discussion surrounding the terminology and conceptual foundations of interactive criticism. A researcher examining the concept of Arab interactive criticism finds themselves confronted with the same difficulty encountered when investigating the concept of digital or interactive literature. Some critics have referred to it as "digital criticism," including Al-Sayyid Najm and Mohamed Aslim, while other critics have adopted the term "interactive criticism," including Melhem Ibrahim, as reflected in his personal blog and his book *Literature and Technology: An Introduction to Interactive Criticism*. Such writings may be classified among the attempts to establish a clear and precise definition of the term "interactive criticism." Among these is Al-Sayyid Najm's discussion of the identity of digital criticism, in which he states:

"The objective and conscious examination of the secrets of narrative/scenic techniques, in addition to the secrets of technological techniques, in analyzing the digital creative work, highlighting its primary elements that constitute it, and then demonstrating the digital creator's ability to employ one element or another, as well as the degree of success achieved in integrating that element into the overall structure of the digital creative work."^{xiii}

He also defines it as:

"The set of tools and means available to the digital critic for understanding and interpreting the digital creative work. These include a purely technical approach, a purely creative approach, and, finally, a dual approach that combines both the technical and aesthetic dimensions in the digital critic's engagement with the digital work."^{xiv}

Through the definitions provided for interactive criticism, it becomes clear that interactive criticism is governed by a set of rules and tools that regulate the critic's reading and analysis of the digital text. Its judgments are therefore not arbitrary; rather, interactive criticism constitutes a point of convergence and intersection with the critical approaches established within the field of literary criticism, including deconstruction, semiotics, and reader-response theory.

This is also acknowledged by George Landow, one of the leading theorists of hypertext, who emphasizes the close relationship between digital texts and contemporary critical theory. He points out that the inventors of computer linking/hypertext programs benefited from post-structuralist ideas, stating:

"The parallels between computer-based hypertext and critical theory are striking in several respects. Perhaps the most important is that critical theory provides the signs and theoretical foundations for theorizing hypertext; conversely, hypertext provides the signs and means for embodying literary theory and exploring its dimensions, particularly those related to textuality, narrativity, and the roles and functions of the reader and the writer."^{xv}

Thus, critical theories and hypertext become complementary, linking theorization with embodiment, with the ultimate objective of advancing literature and realizing its literary characteristics.

In what follows, we will attempt to present examples of the integration between critical theories and interactive texts, an integration that has given rise to a form of interactive criticism possessing distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from traditional print-based criticism. We will also demonstrate how interactive criticism benefits from the procedural concepts of traditional critical theories, which were originally applied to print texts, in contrast to the modern procedures applied to interactive texts.

A. Interactive Criticism and Deconstructive Criticism

Like any other critical approach, deconstruction is based on a set of foundations and principles, including the binary opposition of language/writing. Deconstruction has assigned writing an important role and status in the literary work, given the meaning it contributes to the interactive work through its characteristic of presence. Thus, there were no particular problems concerning writing in this type of literature, despite its association with sound, whether through combining writing with sound or translating sound into written words. Its presence and significance have not been eliminated, despite our ability to substitute it with sound and the various media provided by technology. Writing has therefore remained "characterized by the features that have granted it the position it occupies in deconstructive studies. The most prominent of these features is its ability to convey meaning even in the absence of its sender, as well as the possibility for writing to refer to something that is not present within it. This becomes evident digitally when written words become icons that lead to a link to another text or texts. In addition to containing an absent meaning and referring

to it, a digitally written word can point to other meanings and significations. Such words may function as links and gateways to other texts, which may be written texts or otherwise, and these words may sometimes constitute the titles of those texts. Their function consequently changes: after having been part of one text, they become central to another text generated by the authority of their presence.”^{xvi}

As for the principle of *différance* in interactive creativity, it manifests itself in the language and symbols employed in this type of texts, as well as in the medium through which these works are presented. The deconstructive perspectives on traditional printed texts and modern interactive texts also converge in the view that meaning does not pre-exist as something already present before us. Rather, it differs according to our reading of signs; consequently, meaning multiplies according to the multiplicity of readers. This is particularly evident given that digital literature is based on hyperlinks that provide us with multiple paths, allowing the reader to choose among them. Thus, the instability and non-fixed nature of meaning, which deconstruction advocates, become manifest.

Jacques Derrida, the pioneer of the deconstructive approach, also discussed another important concept, namely the concept of the trace, which he regarded as fundamental, focusing on the binary opposition of presence and absence. He states: “The trace is that which points to and erases at the same time, that is, which is never fully present.”^{xvii} When we attempt to draw upon Derrida’s contribution to the reading of an interactive work, our attention is drawn to what he has proposed concerning the word and sound—upon which every interactive text is based—and their role in clarifying meaning. He considers them to be “a fabric of spoken traces, and minute degrees of displacement as differentiation and variation that characterize the relation to the Other.”^{xviii} The trace left by this type of literature, which has acquired this characteristic through technological support, is clearly manifested. Our acceptance of interactive literature, and our endeavor to investigate it, as well as to explore how it should be studied and received, constitutes in itself a trace.

Interactive Criticism and Semiotic Criticism

A. Interactive Criticism and Semiotic Criticism

Semiotic criticism is one of the most important approaches and one of the closest to interactive critical practice, as it is an approach based on the study of linguistic and non-linguistic signs. The interactive text contains numerous linguistic and non-linguistic signs and symbols—sound, image, colors, music, movement, and so forth. It is therefore a multidimensional and branching text in which the relationships linking these various signs and symbols intersect. A sign consists of the signifier (signifiant), which represents the auditory image of the sign, and the signified (signifié), which refers to the mental concept evoked by the auditory image perceived by the recipient. Thus, the sign emerges through the process of linking these two elements.^{xix}

Applying the principles of semiotics to the interactive text encompasses various dimensions, including the semiology of the word. The latter varies according to the form, size, typeface, and manner in which the word is written. Writing words horizontally in an interactive text differs from writing them vertically because each mode conveys a different signification. In addition, the digital medium provides the possibility of segmenting letters and arranging them in different ways, as well as exploiting colors and the meanings they convey. Such variations in meaning are interpreted by the recipient according to their background and cognitive repertoire, resulting in a multidimensional and branching reading.^{xx}

As for the semiology of the cover, creative works rarely lack a cover or interface that constitutes an integral space of the work and is closely associated with it. In fictional works, for example, “the functions of the cover are manifested through the roles it performs in providing information and publicity, as well as through the extent of its connection to the fictional work. If the cover is a visual icon, the icon often represents the novel in all its dimensions.”^{xxi} Thus, the cover constitutes an icon that condenses and summarizes the literary work, or refers to it through the colors, shapes, and other elements it contains.

The image is also of great importance in the interactive text and may, in many cases, surpass the importance of language. The image translates and summarizes everything that will appear in the interactive text, including its title and written content, and reinforces the ideas expressed therein. It also helps the recipient understand and discover the meanings embedded in interactive texts.

The important role played by the moving image in discourse, particularly in narrative discourse, is undeniable. It “constitutes a non-linguistic support through which the symbolic operation of iconic functioning can gradually transform into a narrative framework, because the primary factors of perception and stimulation usually encourage the recipient to contemplate the qualitative data contained in the image, thereby transforming it into an image-action.”^{xxii}

The image is closely associated with another important component of interactive creativity that is no less significant, namely color, which constitutes a fundamental element of the interactive creative work. It is part of the image, one of the components of these texts, and is intrinsically connected to it and cannot be separated from it. “Color in interactive poetry is a principal component associated with the image; however, it becomes independent of it when the poet endeavors to employ it as a space for the text or as a background depth for the written text, whether static or dynamic on the computer screen.”^{xxiii}

The creative work does not contain only these mechanisms; rather, it also incorporates other digital means and signs that the creator employs to convey his or her intended meaning to the reader, who analyzes and assimilates them in order to reach and reconstruct meaning. These include signals, icons, and symbols.

A- Interactive Criticism and the Aesthetics of Reception

Before discussing the digital reader and his or her position within the interactive process, it is first necessary to point out that interest in the reader in general emerged relatively recently, with the transition of critical studies from modernism to postmodernism. This transition consequently altered the positions of the poles of interaction, shifting from the triad

(creator–text–reader) toward a focus on (text–reader). Readers were thus granted a central role, to the extent that the recipient of the text became a new producer of it. This orientation emerged prominently among the major figures of the German School of Reception Aesthetics, particularly Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss.

However, this role was initially assigned to the traditional, print-based reader, who remained constrained by the gaps and indeterminacies left by the author of the text and sought to fill them by drawing upon his or her own knowledge, cultural background, and other resources. According to this approach, it is impossible to discuss the text independently of its reader and the latter's contribution to its production.^{xxiv} The following section therefore seeks to present the most important principles and procedures introduced by the German School:

– The Horizon of Expectations:

One of the most prominent concepts introduced by Hans Robert Jauss into Reception Theory is the “horizon of expectations.” He developed this concept with the aim of “overcoming the methodological crisis generated by Marxist and Formalist studies, and of bridging the gap between history and literature, or between historical knowledge and literary knowledge. Through this attempt, he sought to improve the foundations upon which the historical understanding of literature is based.”^{xxv}

This concept is founded upon a historicist view of literature, which, according to Jauss, refers to “a body of texts that have been selected through different readings at different periods in accordance with the criteria governing those readings. When a reader encounters a particular text, he or she compares it with previously encountered texts, which in fact constitute the horizon of his or her expectations. This means that when a text first appears, it is associated with a particular mode of reception and relies upon the prevailing horizon of expectations during the period in which it emerged. Such reception may change from one period to another, either enhancing the status of the text or diminishing it according to the new horizon of expectations.”^{xxvi}

Accordingly, this concept is based on an emphasis on the reader and on linking the development of the literary work to the reader, who is regarded as responsible for understanding the meaning of the text on the basis of his or her previous experiences and knowledge, as well as for classifying texts and determining their status according to whether or not the horizon of expectations is fulfilled.

Thus, Jauss's concept of the “horizon of expectations” refers to “the optimal methodological tool through which this theory can provide its new vision, based on an understanding of the literary phenomenon in its functional, aesthetic, and historical dimensions, by giving an objective and concrete form to the continuous process of its reception. Accordingly, the horizon of expectations enables the theory to distinguish between the reception of literary works at the time of their emergence and their reception in the present, while taking into account the successive stages of reception they have previously undergone. It also enables the literary phenomenon to be grasped in light of its specific and distinctive reception.”^{xxvii}

Gaps or Blanks

Blanks are a concept introduced by Iser in his theory under the influence of Ingarden's notion of indeterminacy or places of indeterminacy, which emphasized the role played by the recipient or reader in filling and determining these gaps or places spontaneously. However, Iser differed from Ingarden in this respect, arguing that the latter's view made the process of meaning production proceed in only one direction, from the text toward the recipient, whereas meaning is produced only through interaction between the two, that is, through two interrelated directions: from the text to the reader and from the reader to the text.^{xxviii}

The concept of gaps or blanks originated with Ingarden and was subsequently developed by Iser, for whom it came to signify “those spaces in which interaction between the recipient and the text takes place.”^{xxix}

For Iser, the issue of blanks is associated with a number of important concepts, most notably the “intentional sequence of sentences.” This involves examining the sequence of sentences and the unexpected gaps it leaves, which the reader must fill by using his or her imagination. The reader is therefore essential and plays a significant role in understanding and decoding the meanings left open by the sequence of sentences. Iser argues that the text provides the reader with two components: the first is explicit and written, through which the text provides the reader with knowledge; the second is implicit and unwritten, allowing readers to represent and imagine things. Without these blanks, the reader would be unable to employ his or her imagination in understanding and interpreting the text.^{xxx}

Thus, blanks or gaps are the unexpressed areas within discourse that require the reader to interact with the text in order to produce meaning. This moves us from artistic production embodied in the literary text toward the production of the aesthetic object, or the new text that emerges after the interaction between the text and the reader.

Through this concept, Iser sought to emphasize that meaning production depends on the interactive relationship between the text and the reader. The text provides both explicit and implicit structures, the latter being what he refers to as gaps or blanks. A competent reader must attempt to decode these gaps on the basis of the textual structures while also employing his or her imagination. This process consequently gives rise to differences and multiplicity in interpretation.

The Implied Reader:

Iser discussed the reader in his theory, referring to a reader who differs from the types of readers previously discussed by his predecessors. He called this reader the implied reader and distinguished him from the other types of readers mentioned by other theorists: “There is Riffaterre's superreader, Fish's informed or knowledgeable reader, and Wolff's intended reader, to cite only a few examples. Each of these models carries with it its own specific terminology. Although these readers are, first and foremost, exploratory constructs, they are derived from a particular group of actual readers who have a real existence.”^{xxxi}

Iser then proceeded to discuss and explain each type of reader. However, what concerns us here is his conception and definition of the implied reader, to which he attached considerable importance, making it a fundamental element in understanding the literary text. He introduced this concept as part of his classification of readers into two categories: the real reader, who can be identified through his reliable responses, and the virtual reader, upon whom all possible actualizations of the text cannot be projected.^{xxxii} The virtual or implied reader is defined as the process through which the text constructs its potential meaning and the realization of this meaning through the reading process.^{xxxiii}

Iser discussed this concept extensively in his book *The Act of Reading*, where he stated: "If we wish to try to understand the effects produced by literary works and the responses they evoke in us, we must acknowledge the presence of the reader without determining in advance, in any way, his nature or historical position. In the absence of a better term, we may call him the implied reader. He embodies all the predispositions necessary for a literary work to exert its effect. These predispositions are not determined by an external and empirical reality; rather, they are established by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader, as a concept, is deeply rooted in the structure of the text: a construct that can in no way be identified with any real reader."^{xxxiv}

Based on what has been presented regarding Iser's concept of the implied reader, it becomes clear that he focuses on the literary work and its structure, as well as on the effect it produces on readers and recipients. This process begins with the interaction between the text and the various textual structures and other elements it contains, which necessarily require the reader's intervention and interaction with them in order to interpret the text. Accordingly, interpretations vary according to the readers themselves. Thus, every text may generate infinite interpretations through different moments of reception and by different readers, thereby producing a continuous process of interpretation. Every text contains gaps and codes that require readers to decode them, and these gaps and codes vary according to the readers who engage with the text.

Everything discussed above is related to the traditional recipient, or the print-based reader. As for the modern recipient, or the electronic reader, his role necessarily differs from that of the print-based reader because of the difference in the medium. The digital reader possesses specific characteristics in his relationship and interaction with the digital text. He is required to have a certain degree of familiarity with digital technology, as well as with the aesthetic particularities of this type of text. The digital text therefore requires a recipient with new qualifications that correspond to its specific nature and who is capable of elevating the process of interaction. Here, interaction does not merely refer to the initial act of reception in which the reader encounters the digital literary text; rather, it refers to the exploratory journeys undertaken by the reader in order to comprehend the digital text from its various dimensions. Ultimately, this enables the reader to add whatever he deems appropriate to the interactive text, since "the interactive reader is a fundamental element in defining the concept of interactive literature, and without him it is impossible to speak of the realization of this concept."^{xxxv}

The recipient, or digital browser, has thus achieved the significance that the German School attributed to the reader, a significance that was difficult to apply to the traditional text. This is in contrast to digital literature, whose textual structures are more compatible with such a conception, to the extent that the recipient has come to assume the role of master and owner of the interactive process. As George Landow states: "Hypertext facilitated the understanding of the postmodernist concepts that appear obscure, deviant, and overly ambitious when applied to printed paper texts."^{xxxvi}

Furthermore, filling in the textual gaps identified by the theorists of the German School is no longer an unattainable or difficult task for the digital recipient, since such gaps have become more apparent in digital texts. Any reader can identify and distinguish the gaps that require completion, as they are often accompanied by explicit invitations from the author to the reader to attempt to complete the text according to what they consider appropriate and to add whatever is necessary to complete its meaning.^{xxxvii} The reader has consequently become what Jamil Hamdaoui terms an "interactive author."

Indeed, the reader "participates with the author in constructing the digital text through his or her observations, comments, directions, guidance, and evaluations."^{xxxviii} This role derives from the specific nature of the digital text, in which beginnings and endings are absent, thereby granting the reader the freedom to begin reading from any point of their choice. Reading this type of text is consequently open-ended,^{xxxix} resulting in an infinite number of possible readings of the digital text, which vary according to the readers and the starting points they adopt. A single reader may also produce multiple readings depending on the path chosen and the point from which the reading begins.

Moreover, the digital reader or recipient is empowered to participate in writing part of the digital text and to contribute to its interpretation and composition. The digital author then receives this contribution, transforming the digital reader—who, in Iser's terminology, may be regarded as the "implied reader"—into a digital creator, while the author of the text becomes a new recipient of that text. Thus, an interactive relationship emerges between the creator of the digital text and its reader, whereby each leaves gaps that require the other to fill them. As Fatima Al-Buraiki observes, "what can be noted about the digital author in relation to his or her text and recipient is that the author proceeds from the principle of liberation from the illusion of the completed text, which belongs exclusively to its producer."^{xl}

This interaction and exchange of roles have been enabled by technology for the digital recipient, who can "participate in a discussion session to exchange critical views concerning a recently published poetry collection, listen to the comments of others about it, and express his or her own opinion, while the poet himself may be present at the session, not as the creator of the text, but as a recipient of it like any other participant."^{xli}

Researcher Fatima Berriki has devoted particular attention to the reception of digital texts through new strategies that contribute to the process of textual reception. She adopted these strategies from Aarseth, who, in turn, transmitted them through Koskimaa. She states: "Aarseth, as cited by Koskimaa, argues that interpretation is an inherent part of every act

of reading. When a reader reads an electronic text, they not only engage in interpretation, but also actively navigate their way through the Internet via branching textual pathways. Furthermore, the reader may be allowed to shape the text by adding their own links to the structure of the hypertext. Shaping means reconstructing the text within certain limits. The reader's final function is writing, which means that the reader may be allowed to participate in writing the text; writing may also refer to programming (Programming).^{xlii}

Following the foregoing discussion of interactive criticism and its intersections with other traditional critical approaches, it can be argued that interactive criticism overlaps and intertwines with numerous disciplines. It does not adhere to a single methodology or fixed set of mechanisms; rather, it requires continuous renewal in response to the development of these various disciplines. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to refer to it as an interdisciplinary approach, which is "an open methodological approach that studies literature in the light of a diverse and multifaceted set of sciences and fields of knowledge, with the aim of attaining signification and constructing meaning. Accordingly, this methodology is flexible, open, and encyclopedic, as it draws upon a range of diverse methodologies and disciplines in its construction. There is neither a narrow, monolithic perspective nor a single methodological dimension in understanding and interpreting the literary issue or cultural phenomenon."^{xliii}

The interactive text is thus a complex text that requires the contribution of numerous disciplines in order to be understood and analyzed. Consequently, interactive criticism requires a broad arsenal of disciplines to enable it to confront and adequately engage with this mercurial and constantly shifting text.

Conclusion:

Following this comparative approach to interactive literature and interactive criticism, and after examining the role and status of the reader/recipient in both print and digital literature, it can be argued that the digital reader or recipient has acquired considerable importance and a significant role in the reception process. The digital reader has thus become, in a very real sense, a fundamental contributor to the production of the digital text, through his or her participation with the digital creator in its construction and through the interaction that takes place between them in the process. However, the reception of this type of literature has its own particularities that need to be highlighted in the Arab world, particularly in light of the generally poor quality of Internet services and connectivity (especially Internet bandwidth), which plays an effective role in the dissemination of interactive literature. Furthermore, the limited familiarity of Arab readers, in general, with computer technologies and software may hinder or negatively affect the reception of interactive texts. In addition, there are other significant problems, most notably the disappearance of digital texts from the links through which they were originally published. This situation places researchers in a difficult position, whether they have conducted research on a digital text or are consulting such research, as both may encounter the disappearance of the text, thereby obstructing the research process in this field of literature.

Accordingly, the notion of a fully established interactive criticism, with all its foundations and procedures, in the Arab world remains somewhat removed from reality. Arab researchers continue to face numerous problems related to this type of literature. Some of these problems are purely technical and technological in nature and lie beyond the researcher's control, thereby impeding the process of accessing, receiving, and reading interactive texts. Others are related to interactive literature itself, as no consensus has yet been reached regarding a single terminology or unified concept for this form of creative production. Consequently, some texts are classified as interactive literature, whereas others regard them merely as electronic texts that do not meet the criteria for being considered interactive creative works worthy of critical analysis and interpretation. This discrepancy has a negative impact on the critical process in the Arab context. It is therefore necessary, first, to seek solutions to these problems before embarking on the processes of theoretical grounding, research, study, and analysis of interactive production, both as a creative practice and as an object of critical inquiry.

ⁱ See: Jamil Hamdaoui, *Digital Literature between Theory and Practice: Toward a Media-Based Approach*, Arab Intellectual Foundation, 1st ed., 2016, p. 14.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fatima Berrichi, *An Introduction to Interactive Literature*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Morocco–Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2006, p. 49.

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