

RESEARCH  
ARTICLE**The Contemporary Arab Reader's Reception of the Digital Novel:  
Between Acceptance and Rejection****Farid Aouf**

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**Abstract**

This study seeks to address a central question in postmodern literature: the reality of Arab scholars' reception of digital literature—particularly the digital novel—and the circumstances driving fluctuations in Arab attitudes and reception levels between acceptance and rejection. This is attributed to the dominance of traditional methods centered on "the paper book" within ossified Arab thought resistant to embracing the digital age.

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**Introduction**

Human thought is in constant evolution, and with it, the means of acquiring knowledge have evolved. The "printed book" has long been the most influential medium in captivating readers, shaping their minds, ideas, and souls. Writers such as Al-Jahiz extolled its virtues, describing it as "the companion that does not flatter you, the friend that does not tempt you, the ally that does not weary you, the advisor that does not hesitate with you, the neighbor that does not encroach upon you, and the confidant that neither extracts your secrets with flattery nor deceives you with cunning or hypocrisy." Poets like Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (915-965 CE) echoed this sentiment:

"The noblest seat in this world is the saddle of a steed, And the finest companion of all time is a book."

Following the technological revolution that began in the 19th century, it was inevitable for the human mind to devise new mediums enabling readers to access human knowledge, culture, sciences, and literary genres with

ease, alleviating the burdens of traditional print. Innovations such as the "computer," "radio," "television," and "cinema" emerged, alongside other audiovisual tools that fostered a technologically mediated culture governed by electronic and digital platforms. Among their fruits was the rise of "digital literature" or "interactive literature," which, in its simplest definition as articulated by Fatima Al-Buraiki, is "a new literary genre born from the womb of technology—hence termed 'techno-literature' or "Electronic Literature"—and may also be described as "Techno-literary".

The novel, as a literary genre, has garnered significant attention from readers, serving as the register of Arab life in the contemporary era—a chronicle of experiences, ideas, and behavioral patterns, and an authentic expression of the cultural, religious, political, and ideological frameworks of nations and peoples. During modernity and postmodernity, the novel diversified thematically and stylistically, intersected with other literary genres, and ventured into once-taboo subjects

such as gender, identity, the other, blackness, and more.

The technological revolution has profoundly impacted the novel's relationship with electronic media, giving rise to the "digital novel" in the West, a phenomenon that subsequently spread to Arab countries. The Jordanian writer, Muhammad Sanajla, is considered the first Arab author to venture into the realm of interactive literature with his creative works: "Chat," "Shadows of the One," "Shadows of the Lover," and "The Digital Realism Novel in Critical Theorization," in which he discusses a range of issues, including the philosophy of imagination, the digital age, and the virtual human.

This research aims to address a pivotal issue in post-modern literature: the reality of Arab scholars' reception of digital literature in general, and the digital novel in particular. It seeks to explore the reasons behind the varying levels of reception among Arab readers towards this new literary genre, oscillating between acceptance and rejection. We do not claim that this topic is novel; rather, it is a highly relevant and timely subject, given our entry into the digital age. In this context, Muhammad Sanajla's book, "The Digital Realism Novel," serves as a crucial reference for this study.

Every research project requires a plan and methodology. This study employs a descriptive and analytical approach. Following the introduction, which defines key terms such as reception, the digital novel, and interactive literature, we trace the emergence of the digital novel. Subsequently, we analyze the different levels of reception among Arab readers, ranging from acceptance to rejection, supporting our analysis with arguments from both perspectives. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings of the research.

## 1. Conceptual Elaboration: Reception, Digital Literature, Digital or Interactive Narratives, and the Digital Reader

### 1.1 The Concept of Reception:

Arabic dictionaries unanimously agree that the term "reception" refers to the act of receiving. For instance, in **Ibn Manzur's** *Lisān al-ʿArab*, under the root letters (l-q-a), it is stated: "Talaqqāhu, meaning he received it, and 'reception' denotes the act of receiving, as explained by Al-Azhari. Additionally, the expression 'so-and-so receives so-and-so' implies that an individual welcomes or receives another." (Manzur, 1994)

The term "reception" in English originates from the Latin root "reception", which encompasses the mean-

ings of "action de recevoir" (the act of receiving) and "accepter" (acceptance). Its first use in French criticism dates back to 1979, during a conference held in Innsbruck, organized by the International Association of Comparative Literature (AIRC) under the theme "Communication Littéraire et Réception" (Literary Communication and Reception). The conference featured the German theorist Hans Robert Jauss, coming approximately a year after the French translation of his seminal book, "Pour une Esthétique de la Réception" (Toward an Aesthetic of Reception), by Claude Maillard.

This event marked the beginning of significant attention towards reception theory, which initially gained prominence within the field of limited comparative studies. Subsequently, French academic journals began publishing special issues dedicated to the subject. Moreover, a specialized journal titled "Oeuvres et Critiques" (Works and Critiques) was launched in 1976, with some of its issues focusing specifically on reception theory. (Muhyi al-Din, 2015, pp. 119-120)

From this point onward, the concept of "reception" was coined, as Arab scholars began to engage with Western critical theories and adapt them to the Arab intellectual and literary context. For instance, digital literature—a phenomenon that first gained traction in the West—later influenced Arab writers, with **Mohamed Sanajla** emerging as one of the pioneering Arab creators in this new literary genre.

It is worth noting that defining the concept of reception requires distinguishing between two domains: Linguistic-Communicative sphere: This pertains to the recipient of the message, i.e., the reader as the receiver of the text. And Critical sphere: This concerns the authority of the reader, who occupies a prominent position within reception theory. In this context, the reader engages in the process of interpretation to decode the symbolic meanings embedded in the text. Such an endeavor is an artistic act in itself, wherein the reader contributes through their linguistic proficiency and aesthetic sensibility to grasp the text and uncover its semantic and aesthetic dimensions.

### 1.2 The Concept of Digital Literature

Discussing digital literature inherently involves examining the relationship between literature and technology. Digital literature is the legitimate offspring of the technological revolution, as literary material is now presented in unconventional ways through electronic me-

dia such as the internet, computers, blue screens, television, and platforms like Facebook.

Digital literature can be defined as "narrative, poetic, or dramatic literature that employs informatics in its creation and composition. It relies on computers or digital devices to produce a text or creative work, transforming literary texts into digital, automated, and algorithmic domains." (Hashem, 2019)

In its simplest form, it refers to literary output (narrative, poetry, drama, etc.) consumed on computer screens, integrating multiple electronic media to become a form of "literature beyond paper."

### 1.3 The Concept of Digital or Interactive Narratives

Digital narratives or interactive novels represent a literary genre born from contemporary technology. The critic **Saeed Yaqin** identifies this new narrative form by coining terms such as "hypertext" or "interactive creativity." He defines it as:

"A collection of creative works (with literature being among the most prominent) that emerged through the use of computers. These works either did not exist before or evolved from earlier forms, taking on new modes of production and reception through computers." (Yaqin, 2005, pp. 9-10)

Researcher **Sitah Al-Adhbah** defines digital narratives as:

"Narratives that utilize hyperlinks and connections within a computerized environment to create a narrative text that depends on various media. These include letters in diverse colors and shapes, as well as various visual and auditory media, such as sounds, images, maps, flash animations, and more." (AL-Shara'a, 2021)

Similarly, **Fatima Al-Breiki** describes interactive narratives as:

"A form of narrative art in which the author employs the features offered by hypertext technology. This enables connections between texts, whether written, static images, animated visuals, live or musical sounds, graphical animations, maps, or illustrations, through hyperlinks that are always highlighted in blue." (AL-Bariki, 2006, p. 112)

It is evident from this definition that the researcher emphasizes a crucial element in defining the concept of the interactive novel: textual interconnectivity or the coherence of events achieved through the employment of multimedia.

In his book *The Novel of Digital Realism*, Mohammad Sanajla offers his own definition of this form, stating:

"It is a novel that incorporates the new forms produced by the digital age, embedding them within the narrative structure itself, to express the digital era, the society it has created, and the human being of this era—the 'virtual human' living within the virtual society. The Novel of Digital Realism is also a narrative that reflects the transformations accompanying humans as they transition from realism to virtuality." (Snajila, 2005, p. 11)

From this concept, it becomes apparent that the Novel of Digital Realism is a form of storytelling that relies on electronic media (such as computers, screens, Facebook, etc.) To narrate events. It translates the transformations experienced by the virtual human as they shift from a physical reality to a futuristic existence within a virtual society—or more precisely, a digital society. This society leverages contemporary technology in the literary domain, replacing traditional tools such as the printed book.

It is worth noting that the previous definitions all share a common feature: the use of audiovisual media to present the events of the narrative text and to establish interconnections between them.

### 1.4 The Concept of the Digital Reader

It is impossible to discuss the digital novel or interactive literature without addressing the concept of the digital reader. Postmodernism, through reader-response theory and critical studies in general, elevated the position of the reader to a position of authority. Michael Riffaterre classified readers into several types, including the "detective reader," the "superior reader," and the "implied reader," emphasizing that the act of reading is a civilizational process, one of creativity and production rather than passive consumption or naïve engagement. Consequently, the reader is viewed as both a creator and a producer, not merely a consumer.

The term digital reader, however, did not emerge until the scientific and technological revolution that swept the world in the 20th century. For a long time, traditional methods dominated the act of reading, with the printed book serving as the primary source of knowledge. Despite technological advancements, this notion remained deeply ingrained in human thought, which had developed highly advanced tools such as computers, televisions, blue screens, and audiovisual communication devices. However, there was significant resistance to the idea of literature being accessed through computers—either due to ignorance regarding

their applications or because of deeply rooted habits that were difficult to overcome.

With the advent of **digital literature**, the elements of the creative process underwent a transformation. Traditionally, this process involved three key components: (Yaqin, 2005, p. 10)

The Writer                      →                      The Work (The Book)  
The Reader

However, with the emergence of digital literature—referred to by Saeed Yaqin as “hypertext”—the components of the creative process were redefined as follows:

The Creator                      →                      The Hypertext                      The  
Computer                      The Receiver

The distinction between the traditional and modern creative processes lies in the introduction of two new elements: The hypertext, which refers to the digital text and is labelled as “hypertext” due to the seamless connectivity of its scenes and components, and the computer, which signifies that the text is no longer printed on paper but is instead read on a computer screen.

This shift requires the reader, in addition to their literary and artistic competence, to possess advanced technical skills. The digital reader must be proficient in operating computers, navigating interactive texts, and contributing creatively and interactively to the text. When these attributes are combined, the individual is referred to as a digital reader.

From this perspective, the digital reader—also referred to as the electronic reader—is defined as the individual, or recipient, who engages with books, electronic materials, articles, magazines, newspapers, and other content through electronic devices such as computers and smartphones. The digital reader has the ability to access digital materials easily, at any time, and from anywhere via the internet or through various applications that provide such content.

The digital reader must possess a set of specific attributes. **Zohour Karam** asserts that the digital reader, like the digital author, “is expected to have the same competencies in digital culture. This implies that the producer of the digital text and its recipient both employ the same digital technologies.” (Karam, 2009, p. 38) The concept of digital culture is broad, beginning with the reader’s technical proficiency in operating devices, understanding programming languages, navigating hyperlinks, and interacting with the content they encounter. Through the impressions they record, the

reader transitions into a creator and producer of knowledge. The digital reader is characterized by a sense of freedom, breaking away from the constraints of traditional print-based reading. They interact digitally with the text, and through this interaction, they develop an internal sense of ownership over the creative process.

**Iyad Ibrahim Faleh Al-Bawi** elaborates on this by stating:

“Interactive literature grants the recipient the opportunity to feel as though they own everything presented to the network. This elevates their status and affords them the chance to engage in real-time dialogue through the very **platforms** that host the interactive text, regardless of its type or genre.” (AL-Bawi & AL-Shaari, 2011, p. 25)

## 2. Digital Novel: Foundations and Context

Digital literature emerged in the 1980s and remains in its infancy, both in the Arab and Western literary spheres. It does not signify a rupture between literary works and their non-digital counterparts but rather serves as a continuation, albeit through audiovisual electronic media. Consequently, it has been designated by various terms, including electronic, digital, interactive, hypertextual, informational, virtual, machinic, screen-based, networked, multimodal, programmed, computation, algorithmic, media-based, web-based, Facebook-based, social media-oriented, and media literature, among others. In the United States, it is commonly referred to as “hypertext” literature, while in France, it is known as *Littérature informatique* or *Littérature Numérique*, both meaning “digital literature.”

This creative literary form gained prominence in the 20th century and made significant strides beyond the confines of traditional narrative writing, which was predominantly paper-based. It opened new horizons for readers, enabling them to engage with technological media—often referred to as “the blue screen”—and interact with texts in novel ways.

The interactive novel first emerged in the United States with the pioneering work of American writer Michael Joyce, who introduced his groundbreaking novel *Story of Afternoon* in 1986. This work, widely recognized as an electronic or techno-literary novel, was created using the *Storyspace* software, developed in collaboration with his colleague Jay David Bolter. Following this, two interactive French novels were published on CD-ROM in 1996: *20% d’amour en plus* (20% More Love) by

François Coulon and *Le Temps Sale* (The Dirty Time) by Franck Devofore. In the same year, American writer Robert Arellano released his novel *Sunshine 69*. (AL-Bariki, 2006, p. 113)

In the Arab world, Mohammed Sanajleh is considered the first Arab author to venture into the realm of the "electronic novel" and is often regarded as the founding figure of this new literary genre. His novel *Shadows of the One* revealed his pioneering role, demonstrating how he successfully harnessed the technologies of the internet to serve his narrative vision. (Snajila, 2005, p. 5)

Sanajleh gained prominence through multiple works in this emerging genre, which he termed "Interactive Novels," including *Shadows of the One* (2001), *Chat* (2005), *Frost* (2006), *Masterpiece of the Spectators in the Wonders of the Emirate* (2016), and the digital realism novel, where he explored the theoretical framework of this literary form and the Arab readership's reception of it—oscillating between acceptance and rejection.

### 3. Levels of Arab Readers' Reception of the Digital Novel

Every movement advocating innovation in any era or culture encounters both acceptance from its proponents and resistance from its detractors. A historical survey brings to mind the intense rivalries between Abu Tammam and his critics, Al-Mutanabbi and his opponents, as well as Abu Nuwas and adherents of the classical school of poetry—such is the course of literary evolution.

In this digital age, technological advancements have not only transformed the means of writing but have also necessitated the utilization of new tools for literary creativity. Among the outcomes of the technological revolution is the emergence of the electronic book and the digital novel as a novel literary genre.

The reality is that the reception of the digital novel by Arab readers has not been uniform, oscillating between acceptance and rejection. This divergence stems from the variation in perspectives and critical viewpoints. Indeed, the digital works of Mohammed Sanajleh have garnered attention from only a small fraction of Arab readers. Moreover, they have faced severe criticism, with many urging him to publish his works in print format. This chapter explores the reception of the digital novel, beginning with the rejection it has faced.

#### 3.1 The Level of Rejection

We have deliberately chosen to begin with the level of rejection, as its proponents are more numerous. It is natural for every call for innovation to be met with skepticism and resistance.

In his novel *Digital Realism*, Sanajleh discusses the opposition, skepticism, and accusations he faced following the publication of *Shadows of the One*. He describes the relentless calls for him to release his works in print, based on the argument that digital platforms are not universally accessible, while printed books remain the conventional medium for reading. In the preface to *The Digital Realism Novel*, Sanajleh reflects on this resistance:

"What was most surprising, however, was the overwhelmingly hostile reaction to the experiment. *Shadows of the One* faced attack after attack, with critics dismissing it as overly complex, exhausting, and incomprehensible. Some went as far as to deem it unreadable. Other critics assailed the novel for its reliance on scientific theories. One even claimed that literature and science could never coexist, thereby stripping *Shadows of the One* of its literary essence." (Snajila, 2005, p. 8)

It is hardly surprising that the digital novel has been met with reluctance from a considerable segment of readers and scholars, most of whom have been conditioned by traditional methods of engaging with narrative fiction. For many, the transition from printed books to reading novels on a computer screen remains difficult—even while they willingly spend hours watching films on the same "blue screen." This resistance, as some argue, stems from the entrenched Arab literary mindset, which has long adhered to conventional models:

"The Arab intellectual tradition is deeply rooted in imitating established precedents. Consequently, it instinctively rejects novelty, perceiving it as a form of deviation that must be resisted." (Snajila, 2005, p. 8)

A significant number of scholars have adopted a critical stance toward interactive literature. Opponents argue that interactive literature is a hybrid and intrusive genre, alien to the creative process—one that is embraced only by those lacking true literary talent, who instead seek to compensate for their shortcomings by exploiting the technological affordances of modern digital tools. (AL-Bariki, 2006, p. 130) Jihad Abu Hashem, in his article *Digital Literature: A New Vision of Text Beyond Paper*, expresses a particularly dismissive view:

"Interactive digital literature, in its participatory sense, does not exist within Arab literature. Labeling certain



naïve individual attempts as pioneering is frivolous—a fleeting trend that should no longer be entertained. Criticism must cease to indulge it! I believe that academic departments—despite my aversion to the word ‘must’—should put an end to the current trivialities surrounding studies and research on digital literature, in both its aforementioned forms. Instead, they should engage students and researchers in meaningful and substantive studies that truly enrich the literary and critical landscape". (Hashem, 2019)

In reality, both of these extreme stances—outright rejection or uncritical glorification—fail to do justice to the interactive novel. This genre necessitates two distinct skill sets: first, the literary talent required for narrative artistry as a traditional literary craft, and second, proficiency in utilizing computers and digital technology. Unfortunately, the latter skill remains underdeveloped in the Arab world. Thus, the issue is not one of legitimacy, but rather of adaptation—the need to embrace the digital age in all its dimensions and transcend rigid traditionalism. Creativity is an evolving process, unbound by fixed parameters.

### 3.2 Acceptance of the Digital Novel

For the reasons outlined above, the digital novel has garnered interest from only a small segment of readers and scholars. Nevertheless, this emerging genre has been welcomed by some, who view it as a promising literary development. Their acceptance is based on several key considerations: (AL-Bariki, 2006, pp. 129-130)

- Interactive literature serves as the quintessential literary model of the digital age, accurately reflecting the technological advancements of contemporary culture. It is a product of this era and will stand as its literary representative for future generations.
- Interactive literature acknowledges the active role of both the author and the reader in text construction, positioning the reader as an equal participant in shaping the narrative.
- It offers unparalleled dynamism and freedom, allowing readers to interact with texts in ways impossible within traditional literature.
- The sheer amount of possibilities for textual exploration provides a boost in intellectual involvement, innovation, and monotony.

As a result, Arab readers have begun to engage with digital novels with growing interest. They have been

captivated by the technological innovations employed by digital narrators, which have drawn widespread admiration. In the preface to *The Digital Realism Novel*, **Ahmed Fadl Shabloul** praises this literary form:

"I read the book *The Digital Realism Novel* by the avant-garde writer Mohammed Sanajleh through the Internet. I was deeply impressed by both the work itself and the groundbreaking ideas it presents, as well as its unconventional themes, which herald the birth of a new Arab literary tradition—one that emerges through the innovative capabilities of digital technologies. These tools are no longer a mere fantasy; they are now at our disposal. However, what is still needed is not just new ideas, but an entirely new intellectual approach—one that transcends conventional thinking". (Snaijla, 2005, p. 3)

Several scholars have endorsed this perspective, emphasizing that lifestyle changes necessitate the adoption of new mediums and technologies. Zohour Karam articulates this view, stating:

"Each historical period has the right to express itself through the tools and resources available to it. These resources are not merely communication mediums; rather, they reflect the intellectual framework of their time. As life evolves in accordance with changing modes of thought, intellectual processes also advance based on how we engage with these evolving conditions. It is a complex and interwoven process". (Karam, 2009, p. 13)

This assertion underscores the notion that every phase in human history has been marked by its own distinct tools and methods of expression. While early humans had no option but to inscribe their narratives on stone, modern individuals have gained access to new expressive forms, made possible by the technological revolution. This revolution has facilitated the emergence of a creative culture governed by digital and electronic media, redefining the landscape of artistic and literary production.

### Conclusion

It is crucial to emphasize that advocating for interactive literature does not equate to eliminating the printed book, which remains indispensable. Rather, digital literature serves as an extension of traditional literature, distinguished primarily by its incorporation of contemporary tools and techniques. A historical examination of civilizations reveals a continuous coexistence between different literary forms. The relationship between digital and print novels is one of continuity ra-

ther than rupture, reflecting the natural progression of human thought and communication mediums. The transition from oral storytelling to print and subsequently to digital platforms is a logical and evolutionary process, shaped by the dynamism and fluidity of cultural development. The digital novel, in particular, has evolved from the print novel by integrating innovations in both creative writing and literary criticism.

The arguments posed by opponents of digital literature are weak and unfounded. As Jaber Asfour aptly notes: We are facing a second revolution in literary genres with the emergence of digital literature. Should we accept this form? The question is not even up for debate, as digital literature has already established itself on a global scale.

He further emphasizes that the digital novel is a flexible and accessible form, capable of expanding beyond text

to incorporate other semiotic systems. It allows for the integration of audiovisual effects, enriching the reader's sensory experience and broadening the scope of literary engagement in unprecedented ways.

The transition to the digital age in the Arab world must occur gradually, fostering a digital culture that younger generations can grow into. This transformation should be actively integrated into educational curricula, ensuring its institutionalization within academic frameworks. Moreover, achieving this shift requires the provision of essential technological infrastructure, including free access to the internet and computers. Only then can we legitimately speak of a fully realized digital era—a reality that, regrettably, remains in its incipient stages in our region.

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