






# The Fictionalized Universe of the Narrative Regarding the Virtual Influencer Miquela Sousa

Rita Lucía Rivera-Prado <sup>\*1</sup> , Arnau Gifreu-Castells <sup>2</sup>   
and Yasmin Sayan-Casquino <sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Peruvian University of Applied Sciences, Spring Prolongation 2390, Peru  
u201613033@upc.edu.pe/ rriveraprado@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Autonomous University of Barcelona, Plaça Cívica, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain  
arnau.gifreu@uab.cat

<sup>3</sup>Peruvian University of Applied Sciences Spring Extension 2390, Peru  
pcavysay@upc.edu.pe

**Abstract.** This research is specifically directed towards the emerging phenomenon of "virtual idols", with a particular focus on the case of Miquela Sosa. To this end, the theories and guides on narration from prominent authors such as Aristotle [1], Greimas [2] and Rimmon-Kenan [3], among others, were explored. The content analysis technique was carried out, creating as an instrument card of the elements present in the creation of narrative universes, rescuing three fundamental concepts: space, time and characters. Furthermore, the theoretical synthesis proposed by Sánchez Navarro [4] was used, which integrates the previously mentioned ideas, with the objective of understanding the composition of the virtual idol's narrative. And the instrument was applied exhaustively to Miquela's videos and photographs on her main social media platform, Instagram. The analysis details how the universe of narration is shaped by these innovative characters who stand out as a new phenomenon for telling stories.

**Keywords:** Influencer, virtual influencer, narratives, time, characters.

## 1 Introduction

With technological development, the way of telling stories has changed since users have become consumers and prosumers of narratives [5]. Innovative characters like Hatsume Miku demonstrate this. Miku has managed to play a role in the construction of a fantastic narrative in real life [6] since the ideas and assumptions of the users of the software from which she was born are applied to the construction of her story [6]. Lil Miquela, on the other hand, appears in this paradigm as a virtual influencer. Created by the Brut brand, it reinforces the fantasy of what is considered beautiful, having thousands of followers waiting for her publications [7]. This virtual influencer blurs the

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lines between what is real and what is conceived with her storytelling since she has a detailed personality where contemporary characters, celebrities and artists intervene [8]. This character and her creators managed to generate uncertainty about whether she was a real person or a character. Her official statement established that Miquela was a robot [8]. Miquela appears as a new way of telling stories with an attractive narrative, but this resource has not yet been analyzed. The question arises: How is the narrative of a virtual idol constructed?

This work seeks to analyze the narrative of Lil Miquela, one of the first virtual influencers to achieve massive success on social media [9], to understand how the narrative is constructed in this new type of story creation model. Eighty posts from social media were analyzed taking into account the three main axes in the narrative: space, character and time [4]. Instagram, being the main one of the influencer.

## 2 State of the Art

### 2.1. *Studies on narration*

Narration remains immersed in everything that is around us and since its beginnings it has been one of the most basic ways to transport knowledge (4). Multiple authors have suggested different ways of understanding and analyzing it. Aristotle's Poetics was one of the first studies to analyze the construction of stories and serves as a basis for the development of narrative theories.

In 1970, Greimas proposed a theory of narrative analysis rescuing the work of Lévi-Strauss. The analysis starts from the interpretation based on the myth. It was the philosopher Todorov, in that same year, who covered poetic analysis by applying the scientific method in the analysis of literature. The application of the method helps an objective understanding of the narrative, but makes certain aspects escape the analysis, such as the metaphorical interpretation brought to the analysis of the sentences. Subsequently, Rimmon Kenan compiled the most significant contributions of all these authors in her work titled *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, published in 1983 where she focuses on the analysis of the Russian formalists. Besides authors such as Greimas, Vladimir Propp or Claude Bremond, among others, their theories are cited by the author for the construction and reinterpretation of the concepts proposed by them for the analysis of the narrative. Rimmon Kenan explicitly describes that her analysis does not propose to be a new way of reviewing the narratives, unlike the authors to whom she refers, rather it complements past contributions and applies new interpretations to the texts, proposing a different vision so that the theories on other platforms are understood [3].

In 1996, Bordwell worked on the meaning of narration applied in fiction cinema, reflecting on Greimas theories and Todorov's, among others. Narratives can function in a visual context outside of just writing [10]. Bordwell mentions that the development of film genres has provided a possibility for research in cinema. Concluding that the

value of such an approach for the study of films would be a little clearer if the work on narrative theory in that field were more widespread, stating that “There are practically no studies of the representative dimension of film narrative, although some work on gender theory has been useful.” [10]

In 2006, in the book *Audiovisual Narrative*, Sánchez Navarro compiled and analyzed the narrative progress of all the previous authors. Sánchez Navarro seeks to synthesize how the analysis of poetics can be transferred to its application in the audiovisual field, dividing the conclusions of narrative studies into elements. All these analyses sought to understand the composition of the narratives, in terms of their form and elements.

## ***2.2. Influencers and Virtual Influencers***

Influencers are popular people on social media, known as digital influencers who have the ability to make a message spread quickly to their followers. The appearance of these internet celebrities in different media increases the public's trust in the messages, memory and recognition of the brands that have been advertised, as well as increases the possibility of purchasing a product [11].

In 2016, in the article ‘The Hatsune Miku Phenomenon: More Than a Virtual J-Pop’ [12], Diva analyzed the phenomenon of one of the first virtual idols in Tokyo. The character of Hatsune Miku, the anime-style brand image of Crypton Future Media's audio and synthesized voice program, gave a live concert for five thousand people [6]. The concert featured a band of musicians, a team of visual creators and 3D modelers, animators and artists working simultaneously to carry it out. This event captured the world's attention and popularized the avatar's image worldwide. Multiple media outlets replicated the news and in this way the milestone of one of the first cases of virtual idols was marked.

## **3 Theoretical Framework**

The construction of the narrative, specifically in a world that is fictional but credible, is configured from three axes. The axes are essential so that a story can be told correctly. These are space, time and characters [4].

### ***3.1. Space***

Space can be understood as the frame of reference where the action will occur. Likewise, it interacts with all the elements that make up the narrative. Such as: the character, since he establishes himself in the place, performs the action and lives there. The relationship with time, since it establishes changes and affects it [13].

Space helps establish semantic relationships, which means that we will provide meaning and context to the characters where they are located (4). In addition, the story is given characteristics that in turn can describe the emotional levels or social scales in which an individual finds themselves, information about their character and the psychology of the story itself can be known [4].

Space can be a facilitator so that the story can be told either through the position in which the view is provided and the one that is provided to us [10]. The space also helps to create a medium of reference in which as viewers we will guide ourselves, but this is referred to and is necessarily subjected to focalization [4]. As for the role of space with the characters, this may have a metaphor or metonymy relationship with what is said about them. It is the space that can clarify how the characters feel [4].

Within the discourse of space, net description is usually used, by which a specific location is provided to the narrative action without it being developed in depth [4]. A more topographical description of the environment is provided [4]. The objects are those that also inhabit the space, which is why a dialectic is generated in the narrative [14] specifically so that it can generate the illusion of reality.

On the other hand, space can offer an alternative to justify the character's actions. Space can provide characteristics to one's attitude, not only providing characteristics to historical development, but also as a reflection of the individual's own personality, since this can be evidenced in how the scenario reacts [15]. Through spaces, people generate emotional connections and logical reasoning, understanding that for viewers it can refer to an immediate context and make them react.

### ***3.2. Characters***

The characters live like us, they manifest themselves in the time they have lived with particularities, and to do so they have to respond to being agents of action [4]. Depending on the character's greater or lesser importance and autonomy for the story, There are categories to classify them according to the weight of the actions they offer. These categories first determine volume or elevation. In these elevations we have flat and round characters present. The protagonist or heroes that comprise the flat characters, be these understood as those that are built from having a personality with little complexity. These have quite clear objectives. Round characters, which are understood as complex and developed, present a more elaborate background [4] [15].

Another form of character analysis is found in the fictional modes of Frye. There are 5 classifications that summarize their actions and their relationship with the universe created in history [4]: The divine hero is naturally better than his environment and the rest of men and even the rest of human beings, understood as the mythical hero (a). The second is the hero of the marvelous, in this case the hero is superior to his environment and other men; this superiority occurs partially and does not apply to everyone, it only exists to a certain degree (b); the third place is occupied by the

elevated mimetic hero, in which the hero appears superior to other men, but not to the environment, the so-called 'Tragic Hero' (c). The fourth is the low mimetic, the main one, our hero, is at the same level as other people, he is not superior to his environment, and is considered one of us and his mode of mimesis is low, the 'real Hero' (d). The last category is called irony, in this the hero is inferior to the rest of the characters or pretends to be at a disadvantage compared to the rest and the environment in which he finds himself, the 'Ironic Hero' (e).

### **3.3. Time**

The passage of time is essential for the telling of stories. There is a strictly linguistic time and another that includes a representation. In this case the time analyzed is the mixture of both (4). There are multiple variations of the placement of times and these have narration modalities: the time of the narration (a), the temporality of the narration (b) and the temporal order (c). Narration time governs the different conceptions: it is physical time or experienced time, which can be seen as a result of human understanding of the laws of nature. There is also no consensus of opinion on this form of time (4). Then there is the temporality of the narrative divided into: *Ulterior*, narration after the main story; *Previous*: The previous narration is the act that happens before the main events take place; *Interspersed*: Without applying closure to the story, it is told in different types of fragments; *Simultaneous*: Another narrative act coincides with a superposition of images. Furthermore, there is the temporal order; the events or segments of the story are arranged in time. There is a time of discourse and another of history, these do not always coincide and different segments and temporal variations can be applied (4). Additionally; these are the temporal variations that include: *Anachronies*, that is, events that are placed before their realization (also understood as time jumps or a way for the character to have more clarity about what will happen in the future). Also present are *analepses*, known by the term flash-back, temporal movements that help as a narrative resource to illustrate relevant events from the past. In addition, there are *prolepsis*, which are the movements of anticipation of the present. Finally, the duration and frequency is the change that can occur due to the duration that encompasses time, with a speed or slowness, also depending on the rhythm of the story (15).

## **4 Methodology**

The chosen paradigm was the interpretive one with a qualitative approach and the technique used was content analysis. To do this, the division of the methodology has been taken into account based on the synthesis of the narrative theories compiled by Jordi Sánchez (4). The publications found on the main social media of the virtual influencer Miquela Sousa on Instagram are analyzed. The period of analysis of her publications is from October 2019 to September 27, 2021. Since her narrative experiences change due to the introduction of a character that will modify the way in which she communicates with her audience. Eighty publications were selected at

random within that time period. The main objective is to understand how her narrative works through the elements that make up her diegetic. To do this, three instruments were organized that divide the concepts of space, time and characters for the classification of the publications, and thus be able to determine the functioning of the virtual influencer's narrative.

## 5 Results

To have a vision of the content and the way of narrating Lil Miquela eighty publications were analyzed from the influencer's main social media. It was considered that these posts had to comply with the presence of a character, time and space. Instagram is the social media that was finally analyzed given that the influencer's other social networks function as reposting channels for the content of the aforementioned app. Taking into account the information collected in her publications at a general level, she supports a series of causes with which she has actively collaborated: the fight against Covid-19, support for Black Lives Matter and support for the LGBTQ+ community are some of the most mentioned in their networks. Among the most common characters in her photographs, tags and videos of her we can find Millie Bobby Brown, Rosalía, her ex-boyfriend @Nickilian, her best friend @bermuda and her best friend @blawko22. At the time of the analysis, Miquela's profile had 3.1 million followers and 1,150 posts.

### 5.1. Space

When observing the eighty posts, it is noticed that within their geographical area is Los Angeles, Michigan, and different cities in Brazil that are not specified. Likewise, within the debts and prejudices, the places where the narration occurs are mostly common: Movie theaters, bathrooms, restaurants, parks and busy avenues. At the same time; more exclusive spaces such as galas, premieres, private jets, exclusive parties are used in smaller quantities. Of the eighty publications analyzed, only 18 were in spaces recognizable as her home. Finally, the focalization of space is directed in all its publications to character or space. In the spaces we seek to exalt the figure of Miquela as the main thing in the image, and the background gives the context to exalt the extravagance of her life. Furthermore, the spaces in which the stories are produced are places that can be easily recognized and found since they are linked in their publications.

### 5.2. Time

In this research it was found that the time of the narrative has three main categories. First of all, the later time. The publications refer to events that have already concluded. In second place, the interleaved time. Since the narratives do not end and are told in various publications over time that may have apparently concluded but continue later. Third is the interspersed category, which means that several events are told in the same

publication. This being the case, the categories do not preclude one another, since these end up making sense together.

Regarding temporal order, the time of the story is in present tense in all publications. Written speech is always in the present tense. Past events are indicated with hashtags such as #TBT or by placing in the location section “MyPast”. Moreover, the tense of speech is always in the present tense.

### ***5.3. Characters***

There are various characters within the narrative of Miquela, being the main one in her social media accounts herself. Her character in the publications usually has a rounded development. Since she has a personality built with various layers, she makes use of sarcasm, her mood is variable and is denoted within her publications. Miquela has micro expressions, where after an emotional event in her story such as her breakup with her boyfriend, the character reflects discomfort or appears to have continuous and coherent emotional behavior.

The following publications refer to an emotional event, even if they are not related to what was mentioned in those publications, they denote a change in the character's mood. Miquela doesn't smile the same way or now she has circles under her eyes. She also stops posting with the same frequency or posts memes that are related to her mood. On top of that, the speech in her posts is biased towards various causes and communities such as the LGBTQ+ community or the #BLM movement.

Other characters within her narrative have a flatter development, since many of them are not tagged in the publications or only appear in the background or to the side of Michaela. On the other hand, there are also round secondary characters within the space in which she develops. An example of this is her ex-partner, who is a recognized model. Her best friends Bermuda and Blawko are created by the same company and have their own profiles where they tell more of her personal story.

The speeches within her narrative are almost entirely narrativized or direct, meaning that she is her own narrator and tells the events herself. It is rarely cited, for sometimes she uses famous phrases to narrate. On two occasions other users published for her, but with Miquela's consent.

Her fictional mode is always low mimetic, since her character does not seek superiority over other people with whom she lives in her story. She seeks to be equal to the rest in conditions and does not consider herself as superior to the environment, so she remains within the category of real Hero.

## 6 Discussion and conclusions

The development of narratives is essential to telling stories. The analysis of their forms helps us identify models so that we can explore and understand them. Due to modernity and the emergence of new media; we must adapt to other ways in which to tell stories since it is the media that has a strong influence on several of the aspects in which decisions are made [16]. The analysis of the virtual influencer Miquela shows how the lines of what is real and what is conceived can be blurred when a personality is detailed [8]. In this context, narratives present a new level of complexity. As Baudrillard points out in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* [17], the real and the simulated blur to the point where reality itself becomes a simulation. In this sense, the analysis of the virtual influencer Miquela shows how a carefully constructed personality can become confused in reality and make way for new forms of narrative.

The main objective of this research was the analysis of the fictional construction of Miquela's narrative. For it; the three axes to analyze were those proposed by narrative poetics [4]. Space, time and characters. Space turns out not to be the main thing in most photographs or videos, but it does provide a frame of reference for the development of the story. In the moments in which the space has more prominence is when the activity of the protagonist, Miquela, is carrying out an activity related to her career as a singer or model.

The tense of the narrative is always in the present, but the images may not be found at the same time as the narrative. This does not cause confusion because it is common within social networks. Regarding the development of the character Miquela, eventually, she makes different historical lines in her publications. She has several narratives at the same time and gives her opinion on controversial topics with certain positions. This type of action gives the viewer different possibilities to get hooked on the content. Her songs are released with a preamble within her personal story. An example of this is the mention of a possible romance, a few weeks later a song that narrates what happened will be released. Music, video and vlog are integrated into the story to complete it. In addition, she does not delete her messages, even though they may have a negative effect within her social networks. She also interacts with users in real time and creates other alternative channels to maintain contact.

Among the findings is that the character maintains a personality and character that places her in the low mimetic category. This means that she does not seek superiority over the environment or towards others. But her status and musical talent mean that she maintains a high status, despite this we see her in common or tourist places that anyone can recognize. In addition, the lifestyle that she reflects keeps people aware of what she does. The appearance of recognized figures, whether singers, actors or artists, makes her story present different shades of characters. Miquela's publications have one characteristic in common: the present tense. This decision related to microblogging gives the character an air of authenticity [18]. As Baudrillard points out, in the theory of simulation he talks about the nature of the real and the simulated [17]. In the case of Miquela, that line is blurred since her identity as a character is in the middle of both. Has a presence in the lives of artists or relevant events, although the simulation is revealed, there is uncertainty about her role. Lev Manovich explores in his books *The*



language of New Media (2001) and *Software Takes Command* (2013) how technology influences narrative and the meaning we give it. Katherine Hayles, in her work titled *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), analyzes the perspectives between people, narrative and technology, studying how reality can be mimicked and attempted to be reproduced.

In summary, the analysis carried out demonstrates that the narrative of Miquela Sousa not only has all the elements necessary for the construction of a conventional narrative, but she exploits them to give us the feeling that we are seeing reality and that it can confuse us. The variety of discourses during the development of the narrative can change to be improved and generate expectations in the people who consume it. However, we are still developing the narratives and the user experience with them. Analyzing how it develops provides the possibility of replicating elements, improving them and considering them for the creation of new stories.

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