

# Algorithmic Realities and the Database of Memory: A Digital Humanities Approach to Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines Haruki Murakami's 1Q84 through the critical framework of Digital Humanities, interpreting the novel's bifurcated universe as a reflection of the tension between database logic and narrative structure. Although the story is set in the analogue year of 1984, Murakami's narrative anticipates contemporary digital concerns by portraying reality as a system that appears algorithmic, manipulable, and layered. Through the analysis of Tengo's rewriting of the novella Air Chrysalis and Aomame's movement through a parallel timeline, the study proposes that the world of 1Q84 functions like a simulated environment capable of modification. Drawing on theories of media ecology, database narrative, and network analysis, this study reinterprets the "Little People" and the religious cult Sakigake as metaphors for invisible digital infrastructures and systems of surveillance that shape human agency. The dual moons visible in the sky of 1Q84 symbolise a forked or bifurcated reality, echoing the logic of alternate digital environments that are increasingly becoming a part of our lives. Ultimately, this study argues that Murakami's novel operates as an imaginative blueprint for the digital age by portraying reality as a networked system of memories, narratives, and informational structures.*

**Keywords:** Digital Humanities, Algorithmic Realities, Database Narrative, Data Surveillance, Human Agency.

The development of digital technology has significantly altered how individuals perceive reality, process information, and construct their personal identities. In contemporary society, digital networks and algorithmic systems influence almost every aspect of daily living. Social media platforms, data infrastructures, and computational algorithms constantly shape the production, circulation, and interpretation of information. Consequently, humanities scholars have begun to explore how literature reflects and responds to technological transformations. This intellectual movement has contributed to the emergence of the Digital Humanities, a field that integrates computational thinking with cultural and literary analysis.

Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* provides a fascinating literary text through which these questions can be explored. First published in 2009, the novel presents a complex narrative set primarily in Tokyo

in 1984. However, the world depicted in the novel gradually reveals itself to be a modified version of reality, which the protagonist Aomame identifies as “1Q84.” The “Q” in the title symbolises a question mark, indicating uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the nature of reality itself.

The novel follows two central characters, Aomame and Tengo, whose lives unfold in parallel narratives that eventually intersect. Aomame, a fitness instructor and secret assassin who targets abusive men, unexpectedly finds herself in a slightly altered world after leaving a taxi on a Tokyo highway. Meanwhile, Tengo, a mathematics teacher and aspiring writer, becomes involved in rewriting a mysterious manuscript titled *Air Chrysalis*. As the story progresses, the actions of both characters reveal the presence of hidden forces operating beneath the surface of their realities.

Murakami’s narrative raises profound philosophical questions about memory, perception, and truth. Simultaneously, the structure of the novel resembles digital systems characterised by networks, branching paths, and interconnected data. These similarities suggest that 1Q84 can be interpreted as a literary exploration of algorithmic logic and database structures. This paper argues that Murakami’s novel anticipates the cultural and philosophical challenges of the digital age by presenting reality as a system that behaves like a programmable environment. Through an analysis grounded in Digital Humanities theory, this study examines the symbolic significance of the bifurcated universe, Tengo’s rewriting of *Air Chrysalis*, the mysterious Little People, and the cult Sakigake. Together, these elements illustrate how 1Q84 reflects contemporary concerns about information systems, surveillance, and identity fragmentation.

Digital Humanities have emerged as an interdisciplinary approach that combines traditional humanities research with computational methods and digital theory. Scholars in this field have investigated how digital technologies influence culture, communication, and knowledge production. Rather than replacing conventional literary analysis, the Digital Humanities expand interpretative frameworks by emphasising patterns, networks, and systems. One of the most influential theoretical concepts associated with the Digital Humanities is the idea of the database narrative. Media theorist Lev Manovich argues that databases represent a dominant symbolic form in digital culture, replacing linear narrative structures with collections of interconnected data elements (Manovich, 2001). In digital environments, information is not necessarily organised as a continuous story but as a set of discrete entries that can be accessed in various ways.

This shift from a narrative to a database structure has important implications for the literature. Traditional storytelling typically follows a chronological sequence in which events unfold linearly. In contrast, database narratives present fragmented pieces of information that readers must assemble to construct meaning. Murakami’s 1Q84 exhibits many characteristics associated with database narratives. The novel alternates between Aomame’s and Tengo’s perspectives, gradually revealing the connections between their experiences. Rather than presenting a single storyline, Murakami constructs a narrative network in which individual events function as nodes in a larger system. N. Katherine Hayles further suggests that contemporary literature increasingly reflects the influence of digital media by exploring how information interacts with human consciousness and the embodiment (Hayles, 2012). From this perspective, 1Q84 can be understood as a literary representation of the ways in which narrative structures adapt to a digital culture defined by data flows and informational complexity.

One of the most striking features of 1Q84 is its bifurcated universe. When Aomame descends an emergency staircase from the Tokyo Expressway, she unknowingly enters an altered version of reality. Although the surrounding environment initially appears familiar, she gradually notices subtle differences that indicate a shift in the world’s structure. The most obvious symbol of this transformation is the appearance of two moons in the sky. One moon resembles the ordinary moon known in the real world, whereas the second appears smaller and greenish in colour. This unusual

celestial phenomenon becomes a recurring visual marker throughout the novel, reminding both the characters and the readers that they inhabit a modified reality.

From a Digital Humanities perspective, the two moons symbolise the concept of forked reality. In computer programming, a fork occurs when a project is split into separate versions that develop independently while sharing a common origin. Similarly, the world of 1Q84 appears to parallel the original timeline.

Murakami's depiction of the bifurcated universe reflects broader cultural anxieties about the instability of truth in a digital age characterised by competing sources of information. In online environments, individuals often encounter multiple interpretations of events, making it difficult to determine which version of reality is accurate. By presenting a world in which reality appears to have split into parallel forms, Murakami dramatises the uncertainty accompanying the proliferation of digital information

A central narrative event in 1Q84 involves Tengo's decision to rewrite the *Air Chrysalis* manuscript. The manuscript is written by a young girl named Fuka-Eri, whose imaginative storytelling contrasts with her limited ability to produce polished prose. Tengo's editor suggested that he revise the manuscript to make it suitable for publication. Although the project initially appears to be a simple literary collaboration, the act of rewriting *Air Chrysalis* gradually reveals deeper implications. As Tengo modifies the story, the fictional elements within the manuscript, particularly the mysterious Little People, begin to influence the reality of 1Q84.

This suggests that Tengo's editing process functions metaphorically as a form of recording. In digital systems, modifying the underlying code of a program can change the behaviour of the entire system. Similarly, Tengo's rewriting alters the narrative framework that structures the fictional world.

Murakami thus portrays storytelling as a powerful mechanism that can reshape reality. As Matthew Strecher observes, Murakami's fiction frequently explores the porous boundary between imagination and lived experience (Strecher 2014). Through Tengo's actions, the novel suggests that narratives possess a transformative power comparable to the programming logic of digital systems.

Among the most enigmatic elements in 1Q84 are the "Little People," mysterious beings who appear to operate behind the scenes of the narrative. They emerge unexpectedly and could manipulate events in subtle ways. Their intentions are ambiguous, and their presence is both unsettling and elusive. Within a Digital Humanities framework, Little People can be interpreted as metaphors for invisible digital infrastructures. Contemporary technological systems, such as algorithms, data-processing networks, and automated recommendation engines, often operate beyond the awareness of ordinary users. Despite their invisibility, these systems exert a considerable influence on social behaviour. For example, algorithms determine which news articles appear in search results, which advertisements are displayed to users, and which social media posts gain visibility. In this sense, digital infrastructure shapes human experience without being directly observable.

Murakami's depiction of the Little People mirrors this phenomenon. Although they remain largely hidden, their actions shape the events that unfold in the world of 1Q84. By portraying these forces as supernatural beings, Murakami represents the invisible technological structures that increasingly influence modern society. The religious cult, Sakigake, plays an important role in the narrative of 1Q84. Publicly presented as a spiritual organisation, the group functions as a highly controlled community, governed by strict rules and hierarchical authority. Cult members live under constant observation and are expected to obey the directives of their leader. From a contemporary perspective, Sakigake can be interpreted as a metaphor for surveillance systems that monitor and regulate human behaviour. In modern digital societies, governments and corporations collect large amounts of data on individuals, including browsing habits, communication patterns, and personal preferences.

These data-driven systems often operate without the full awareness of individuals whose information is being collected. As scholars of surveillance studies have noted, such systems raise important ethical questions regarding privacy, autonomy, and power. Murakami's depiction of Sakigake reflects these concerns by illustrating how authority can be maintained through the control of information. The cult's internal structure resembles a centralised network in which knowledge flows upward and obedience flows downward. Through this narrative element, 1Q84 highlights the potential dangers associated with systems that monitor and regulate human activity. Memory plays a crucial role in the relationship between Aomame and Tengo in the novel. Despite years of separation, the two characters remain connected through a childhood memory of holding hands in an elementary school classroom. This shared experience functions as an anchor within the narrative.

From a Digital Humanities perspective, memory in 1Q84 resembles a database structure. Instead of existing as continuous narratives, memories appear as discrete fragments that can be retrieved and interpreted in different contexts. These memory fragments connect characters across time and space, creating a network of relationships that gradually brings Aomame and Tengo together in the novel. Their emotional connection depends not on continuous interaction but on preserving a single shared memory.

Murakami's portrayal of memory suggests that identity emerges from the accumulation of stored experiences. Like database entries, memories shape how individuals interpret the world around them. One of the most significant philosophical questions raised by 1Q84 concerns the nature of reality. Murakami presents a world in which the boundaries between truth and illusion are increasingly unstable. This uncertainty reflects what many scholars describe as the ontological crisis of the digital age condition in which individuals struggle to determine what is real within an environment shaped by complex systems of information.

In the novel, the shift from 1984 to 1Q84 does not occur through a dramatic event or a clearly defined technological mechanism. Instead, the transformation appears subtle and almost imperceptible. Aomame initially notices only small differences in the world around her, such as changes in news reports and historical details. These minor inconsistencies gradually accumulate until she realizes that the reality she inhabits is not identical to the one she previously knew.

This gradual transformation mirrors the experience of navigating contemporary digital environments. In modern society, individuals frequently encounter multiple versions of information across different platforms and media sources. News stories, images, and narratives can be altered, replicated, and redistributed with remarkable speed. As a result, the distinction between authentic and manipulated information often becomes difficult to identify.

Murakami's depiction of 1Q84 therefore reflects the uncertainty that accompanies the proliferation of digital information. The characters must constantly question the reliability of their perceptions and memories, much like individuals who must evaluate the credibility of information encountered online. The presence of two moons in the sky becomes a powerful symbol of this uncertainty. While the moons clearly indicate that something has changed in the structure of reality, they do not provide a clear explanation for how or why the transformation occurred.

Furthermore, the novel suggests that reality may be shaped not only by physical conditions but also by narrative interpretation. Tengo's rewriting of *Air Chrysalis* demonstrates how stories can influence the perception of truth. When the manuscript is revised and published, the fictional elements within it begin to appear in the world of 1Q84. Development implies that narrative itself possesses the capacity to reshape reality by altering the frameworks through which individuals interpret their experiences.

The idea that narratives can influence reality resonates strongly with contemporary discussions about digital media and information culture. Online platforms enable the rapid circulation of stories that shape public opinion, social identities, and political beliefs. In such environments, narratives function as powerful tools capable of influencing collective understanding. Through these themes, Murakami presents *1Q84* as a reflection on the fragile nature of truth in a world mediated by complex systems of communication. The novel ultimately suggests that reality is not a fixed and stable entity but rather a dynamic construction shaped by memory, narrative, and perception. In this sense, Murakami's work anticipates the philosophical challenges of the twenty-first century, in which individuals must navigate increasingly complex informational landscapes while searching for meaning and authenticity.

Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* offers a rich and complex narrative that resonates strongly with the intellectual concerns of the digital age. Through its depiction of parallel realities, hidden systems of control, and fragmented memories, the novel anticipates many philosophical questions associated with contemporary information culture. By applying concepts from Digital Humanities, this study demonstrates how *1Q84* can be interpreted as a literary exploration of algorithmic reality and database narrative. The bifurcated universe symbolized by dual moons reflects the multiplicity of realities generated by digital environments. Tengo's rewriting of *Air Chrysalis* illustrates the transformative power of narrative, while the Little People and Sakigake represent the invisible infrastructure and surveillance systems that shape modern life. Ultimately, Murakami's novel suggests that reality may function as a dynamic informational system composed of interconnected memories, narratives, and data structures. In this sense, *1Q84* serves as a powerful imaginative framework for understanding the complexities of contemporary society.

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