

LITERARY HYPERTEXT

FROM A WRITER'S POINT OF VIEW

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Today the word on the page has ramified into (at least) oral performance, book arts, and text on the screen, with or without graphics, animation and sound. Hypertext is partly a bridge between the world of the book and the world of multimedia, but art made entirely of words is not going to go away. So I'm going to concentrate on hypertext and on texts made of words. Most of the issues I will discuss map onto my colleagues' presentations as well.

I like very much the two questions printed in the program to describe this panel: Can traditional narrative make a successful transition into interactive media? Is a participatory space between author and audience possible without losing the pleasures of closure and individual uniqueness? To ask these questions is to reflect where most readers and most writers are today. But they are two really different questions, and the answer to one doesn't necessarily determine the answer to the other.

I think the first question, about traditional narrative, is, at the surface level, the wrong question, and the answer is probably "no" - traditional narrative can't make a successful transition, and why should it? New media often start their lives as platforms for performance of old forms (e.g. films of staged plays), but they soon develop genres of their own, which depend on the aesthetic potential of the new medium itself. If electronic literature were nothing but pages on a screen, it would be a failure. But not to worry - it was clear as soon as computers were widely available that interactivity is the most interesting new potential offered by electronic literature. Hence hypertext.

Yet the nostalgia for traditional narrative points to a deeper question, a dynamic which may be based in human biology and even physics, rather than based in culture or technology and susceptible to cultural change. It may be that verbal language is inherently linear.

We humans experience time sequentially. We experience the words and text blocks of hypertexts sequentially, as we do all verbal language and perhaps all high-resolution information. In processing information, we depend on the ability to recognize familiar things, that is on repetition. But without some novelty there is nothing communicated, although the preferred balance between novelty and familiarity in a message is culturally malleable. We have a narrow bandwidth for high-resolution information. The deep question of hypertext is whether and how much satisfactory literary experiences depend on the author's maintaining control of the sequences and iterations. Because both the truly random and the mechanically repetitive are empty.

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A traditional story depends on energy created by the reader's identification with a major character in whose life there is an important unsettled issue. By the end of the story, something should have changed, either for the character or for the reader. This is what structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov calls transformation (POP 218-233), in his analysis of the movement from past or current equilibrium to disequilibrium to a new equilibrium (POP 111) through changes of the character's situation or the reader's understanding. We recognize the "pleasures of closure" when new equilibrium is established.

Twentieth century Western literature has spent huge energies fracturing narrative and point of view. Hypertext is a logical extension of this, so well suited to contemporary texts that we would have had to invent something like the computer if it did not already exist, as a platform for something like hypertext. But a lot of the energy of any nonlinear literature depends on the text's frustration of the reader's desire for sequence and/or identification, and the reader's satisfaction in assembling sequence, identification, and coherence from the fragments.

If the reader can't ever identify with any character, then finally the reader is the only character in the story, which misses a major point of fictional characterization. One logical outcome is the virtual world, a playground for the reader to explore either in solitude or in a communal interactive setting. But I want to concentrate on the writer/reader dyad of traditional literature.

As the hypertext poet Jim Rosenberg says, "speech is an inherently linear medium, writing is a medium with an inherently non-linear potential" (EQ 1:1). The question is not just narrative - experiments with hypertext poetry show that sequence and the balance between iteration and novelty are also critical in poetry.

So the second question is still open: Is a participatory space between author and audience possible without losing the pleasures of closure and individual uniqueness? Can we exploit the nonlinear potential of text in ways that the intelligent nonspecialist reader can experience? Or is the true literary pleasure of hypertext only available to the writer as she creates the hypertext web?

Participatory space may be the crux of the issue, even though hypertext has made newly visible how interactive the old forms of reading are, and how much books are direct-access devices. And even though hypertexts are really much less participatory than the hype surrounding them proclaims and many of us would like to think.

If the reader can do anything, then nothing has any particular valence; in order to shape the experience, the author has to limit choice. Tzvetan Todorov speaks clearly to this issue when he writes, "the narrative is not determined in advance, any direction is (in the absolute sense) as good as any other. The censorship which forces the author to choose only one is

what we call *verisimilitude*." (POP 83) But, as Todorov demonstrates, verisimilitude is not congruence with a larger reality, but rather congruence with "the internal requirements of the [work] itself," requirements based in genre.

"Any possible circumstance of language is a possible circumstance of poetry," says Rosenberg. "It is the job of the poet to invest that circumstance with energy." If the reader is left to do that job alone, the reader has become the writer. But for all the democratic cant which has attached itself to hypertext, writers and readers connect with each other because the communication of one person's vision to another person is a source of wonder and pleasure. This privileged relationship can't be realized if the text does not shape and control the reader's experience to some degree. This is still true in hypertext.

The problem of how to create a satisfactory hypertext link is not a question of navigation after all, but of rhetoric. After all, we don't know where a conventional text will go when we turn the page either. The question is how to create a suitable tension between expectation and outcome, between predictability and novelty when the reader chooses a link. Or turns a page.

As Todorov says, "the literary work does not have a form and a content but a structure of significations whose relations must be apprehended." (POP 43). One approach to realizing the literary potential of hypertext is to create perceptible congruence between the larger and the smaller structures of the work, and between structure and theme. The work's rhetoric must be satisfying, its language must be compelling at the level of the individual image, the sentence, the incident, the page, text block or lexia. But in addition, the shape of the entire work, as well as the processes of interaction with the work, must become perceptible to the reader sooner or later as something that is fitting in terms of the experience being generated. This will almost always require the writer to limit the reader's choices, to create shape, even though this may occur in ways which are not dependent on the linear sequence of traditional text. Brenda Laurel's idea of "close-coupling," a meaningful and timely relationship between user decision and system reaction, is important here.

When I invented the COLLOQUY system of interactive poetry, back in the dark ages before the mouse, I saw that there had to be a connection between the reader's action and the poem's response. To limit the reader's possible action enough to make it predictable to the writer so that she can design a meaningful response, COLLOQUY poems use the words of the poem as the menu of choices. This solution anticipated mouse-driven hypertext.

To provide close-coupling, responses in my own COLLOQUY poems begin with the word the reader chose, a very limited esthetic. Although the COLLOQUY authoring system actually allows a lot more latitude, the principle of a meaningful relationship between the reader's action and the poem's response is critical.

Some successful hyperfictions, such as J. Yellowlees Douglas's "I Have Said Nothing," only allow reader choices at the end of a sequence. Works like Douglas's require and encourage the reader to assemble storyline from fragments, but other structures in the text are essential to create the sense of congruence I am talking about. In "I Have Said Nothing" the story always bangs into "the end" before you're ready. Then the reader has to find a new way to begin reading again. The theme of the story, the repeated premature deaths of loved ones, is an oddly satisfying fit with this process of frustration, which creates the shape of the work. Another work, Stuart Moltrop's "Victory Garden," is a world of interlocking stories, each of them quite linear, which can be accessed through a visual map which actualizes the historical context of the Gulf War which the various stories and characters share. Although it is possible to link in nonlinear ways from within a story thread in "Victory Garden," it's fairly difficult to do.

Richard Gess's "Mahasukha Halo" pretty much abandons linear narrativity altogether, yet it is clearly fiction - reading "Halo" is like walking around in a big, alien, exotic city in a thick fog, encountering strange ceremonies, alien beings, and people who keep reappearing to tell you scraps of their story. The work allows lots of reader choice, but it does not tell a story so much as it assembles a gestalt. It's a very good example of how important striking and beautiful language and imagery can be in such a form.

My own translation of my book *Mothering* to Storyspace was remarkably easy because the hard-copy book is extremely nonlinear, and yet there are threads of quasi-story running through it, unified by the sensibility of the narrative voice. Implementing *Mothering* in Storyspace, the default sequence is the sequence of the book's pages, but the threads can be followed by clicking on words which represent the threads, usually indicating a particular character, setting, or mental process such as dreaming. In a way, *Mothering* was born to be a hypertext. The Storyspace version, insofar as it makes the themes more available to the general reader, is a better implementation than the book, although the book preceded the general availability of computer-based hypertext by almost a decade.

There are a bunch of practical and aesthetic problems to solve in creating this new literature, although I think we will soon solve at least the major ones. There's a real risk when writers get invested in clever subtleties which the reader perceives only as arbitrariness, like sequences in which you can't get back to a place you visited before. If the "yielding words" in "Victory Garden" can't be found except by accident unless you test every word on the page, a full reading depends on spending years of obsessive exploration with a single text. The text will have to be pretty delectable for readers to be willing to do that.

The learning curve is a problem that may not go away. Even if interfaces are standardized, which the Web and HTML-

type tools make more likely, the more powerful tools like Storyspace allow each author to create a whole new set of reading problems the reader must solve before she can experience the work. It is easy to get impatient with having to learn how to turn the pages. But this problem goes back before hypertext, at least as far back as James Joyce. How intrusive should the interface be, and how is interface design a part of literary aesthetic?

I'm skeptical about just how democratic the author/reader relationship, in hypertext or elsewhere, can really become, if democracy is defined as eliminating authorial privilege altogether. But hypertext broadens the idea of author usefully, to include possibilities such as film director, architect, liturgist, dramaturge, playground designer, toolmaker. As we learn to make compelling structures in these new paradigms, important literary art will emerge. Some of it may even be hypertext.

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