

What was Hypertext?

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Subtitle	Not provided.
Lead-in / Abstract	More than 30 years ago, Ted Nelson (who coined the term "hypertext") articulated a vision of computers for media -- "designed, written, drawn and edited, by authors, artists, designers and editors." A far cry from AI hype, hypertext was also not a synonym for "node and link."
Participants and speakers	Wardrip-Fruin, Noah (US)
Short biography of participants	Noah Wardrip-Fruin is a new media scholar and artist. He has recently edited two books, both from MIT Press -- <i>The New Media Reader</i> (with Nick Montfort, 2003) and <i>First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game</i> (with Pat Harrigan, 2004). As an artist his work focuses on new media text, including <i>The Impermanence Agent</i> (a storytelling web agent that "customizes" based on reader browsing habits) and <i>Screen</i> (an immersive VR text that interacts with the reader's body). His work has been presented by the Whitney and Guggenheim museums, as well as discussed in reference works such as <i>Information Arts</i> (Stephen Wilson, 2002), <i>Digital Art</i> (Christiane Paul, 2003), and <i>Art in the Digital Age</i> (Bruce Wands, 2004). He has presented his scholarly and artistic work in journals (<i>Leonardo</i> , <i>PAJ</i>), at scientific gatherings (ACM SIGGRAPH, ACM Hypertext), at art and culture conferences (ISEA, Digital Arts and Culture), and in regional new media exhibitions (Boston Cyberarts, New York Digital Salon). He is a director of the Electronic Literature Organization.
Full text	<p>In the <i>Wired</i> magazine version of new media's history — quite popular during the last decade — Nicholas Negroponte was the visionary prophet and Ted Nelson the object of ridicule. However, this construction can't withstand an examination of Negroponte and Nelson's seminal books of three decades ago: <i>Soft Architecture Machines</i>¹ and <i>Computer Lib / Dream Machines</i>.² Negroponte offered a vision of the computer as an artificial intelligence-driven hyper-personalized assistant — a dream almost no closer to reality today. Nelson, on the other hand, articulated a vision of computers as media — "designed, written, drawn and edited, by authors, artists, designers and editors." He also proposed the creation of a worldwide hypertext publishing network; an idea dismissed as farfetched by the new media mainstream that embraced Negroponte's work (at least, until the rise of the World Wide Web). If we turn our attention back to Nelson and ask "What was hypertext?" the answer is very different from that offered by the acolytes of <i>Wired</i>, and also from those offered by academics who, a few years before <i>Wired's</i> appearance, had begun to equate Nelson's work with various literary-critical formulations. Recovering an appropriate meaning for hypertext is necessary if we view ourselves, in electronic art and writing, as having a history. In addition, an understanding of Nelson's work can provide a foundation for understanding recent Web phenomena around blogs and wikis. But we must also consider how a historical point of view may mislead us. Focusing on the Nelson/Negroponte split can produce the impression that hypertext and AI are fundamentally opposed projects. And it is true that the visions of recent hypertext/AI marriages such as the Semantic Web and Adaptive Hypertext are incompatible with Nelson's vision. But a number of computer media artists are now employing tools developed by AI researchers within an approach that is arguably Nelsonian. To understand this work we may need to see Nelson's work in a different relationship — not in comparison with Negroponte, but perhaps alongside that of a figure like Claude Shannon.</p> <p>■ 1. Negroponte, Nicholas. <i>Soft Architecture Machines</i>. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975.</p> <p>■ 2. Nelson, Theodor Holm. <i>Computer Lib / Dream Machines</i>. Self-published, 1974. 2nd ed., Redmond, Washington: Tempus Books/Microsoft Press, 1987.</p> <p>Related internet addresses http://huminf.uib.no/~jill http://grandtextauto.org</p>