THE GENEALOGY OF A CREATIVE COMMUNITY: WHY IS AFTERNOON THE "GRANDDADDY" OF HYPERTEXT FICTION?

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This brief paper will question the role of the mythical progenitor in the creation of a creative commutiy. Are certain kinds of work more likely to be adopted as progenitor of a field, or does the choice of progenitor depend more on social networks, modes of distribution or even chance? Would electronic literature have been different today if Nichols or Malloy had been crowned as the grandparent of the field?

Granddaddy

In 1992, Robert Coover famously called Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1990) the "granddaddy of full-length hypertext fictions" (Coover 1992), writing only five years after *afternoon* was first presented in public (Bolter and Joyce 1987). Since then, both *afternoon* and Coover's description of it have been cited repeatedly in accounts of the history of electronic literature, whether in books, articles or teaching. *Afternoon* has been canonised by scholars, who reference the work far more frequently than any other work of electronic literature, by teachers and even, quite early on, by mainstream literary institutions , as it was included in the Norton's anthology *Postmodern American Fiction* in 1998. How did we come to accept *afternoon* as the unequivocal "granddaddy" of electronic literature (not just full-length hypertext fictions, as Coover in fact wrote)? Although earlier works are regularly mentioned when scholars and teachers recount the history of electronic literature, *afternoon* has certainly become the reference point and is frequently assumed to be the first work of "real" electronic literature. This amplification and reinforcement of certain ideas, works and citations is typical of a print-centric culture, Elizabeth Eisenstein wrote in her history of print (1979), but perhaps we should say, more broadly, that it is typical of a culture such as ours that privileges recorded texts, whether analog or digital, linguistic or visual.

Perhaps *afternoon* is indeed the granddaddy of full-length hypertext fiction, but it is certainly not the sole progenitor of electronic literature. That ancestry is extremely diverse, yet most of it has become almost forgotten, as the more easily accessible and more frequently taught works are referred to more and more often.

Beginnings

It took about twenty years for the early British novel to grow from a point when only five or six novels were published annually to a critical mass with new novels being published more than once a week. As Franco Moretti shows in his book *Graphs, Maps, Tree*, this twenty year timeline can be seen to repeat itself in a range of countries, though with different starting points according to when novels began to be published in that country (Moretti 2005).

Has electronic literature gone through a similar time line? Today, certainly there are new works of electronic literature published at least every week. Twenty years ago, in 1991, hypertext and other genres of electronic literature was not quite new, and although not many of them are remembered, there were at

least dozen or two dozen works being published each year. By 1986, and maybe earlier, five or six works of electronic literature were being published each year, even without including interactive fiction in the count. By the early 1990s, several publishers existed, including Eastgate, Voyager and Electronic Hollywood. With the advent of the web, of course self-publishing became even easier, and a number of online journals appeared that published hypertext fictions. By the turn of the century large organizations such as the Electronic Literature Organization, trAce and E-Poetry were established. So if we are to follow Moretti's twenty year time line for new genres, 1986-2006 appears to be a reasonable span.

Where should we set the beginning of electronic literature? Electronic literature began in many places, at many times. In 1952, in Manchester, computing pioneer Christopher Strachey created a love letter generator (Wardrip-Fruin 2005). In 1966, at MIT in Cambridge, Massachussetts, Joseph Weizenbaum created a simulated conversation agent, *ELIZA* (1966). In 1976 Will Crowther, another Cambridge resident who worked at a technology company, created *Colossal Cave Adventure*, the first textual adventure game, which was then further developed by Stanford graduate student Don Woods (Crowther and Woods 1976).

All these early works were created by computer scientists who were playing with the technology. They did not see themselves as authors, on the contrary, Strachey, Weizenbaum and Crowther all expressed surprise at their experiments being taken seriously by people. They had not intended to create a new form of literature, and were not, as far as we know, building on or even aware of other work in the field. Their work did not immediately start an avalanche of new literary forms. Indeed, they are only recognised as the starting points of electronic literature in hindsight (Wardrip-Fruin 2005).

Alongside the experiments created by computer scientists there were non-linear literary experiments that have also been seen as "proto-hypertexts", and as the starting points of electronic literature – but these were far and few between. Frequently cited examples include Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1963), Cortazar's *Hopscotch* (1998) and Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1988). Works by visual artists such as Len Lye's animated texts in film (1937) orJenny Holtzer's *Truisms* (1977) could also be included.

But none of these works was seen as connected to other works at the time. Although they are important in hindsight, they did not shape a community of electronic literature.

One community of experimental, electronic literature and art in the 1980s met on the WELL. Video and performance art curator Carl Loeffler coordinated the Art Com Electronic Network (ACEN) on The WELL where ACEN Datanet, an early online publication, would soon feature actual works of art, including works by John Cage, Jim Rosenberg, and Judy Malloy. Rosenberg's programmatic poetry *Diagrams No. 4* were published here, as was Malloy's database narrative *Uncle Roger*, which was "a hyperfictional narrative database". Malloy's works were also exhibited in physical art exhibitions.

On the opposite coast of the US, introductions were made through shared friends, by reading papers and journals and at conferences (such as the MacAdemia conferences in Philadelphia in 1988 and at Brown in 1989) and the ACM Hypertext conferences in 1987 and 1989. Stuart Moulthrop describes how at the '89 Hypertext conference he and John McDaid, Michael Joyce and Jay Bolter sat at a computer connected to the internet and searched for other people doing similar things. They found Judy Malloy's work:

It was just like blues men going to each other's performances. Yeah, alright, oh darn that's good. Oh, we're not that good. So we really recognized that she was somebody, and she was part of a community out there in the Bay Area that was really important and exciting. I can remember coming away from that moment thinking that, you know, there might be a real hope for what we were trying to do because other people were doing it. (Rettberg 2011)

In an interview with Ransom Center archivist Gabriela Redwine, Michael Joyce described how he came to realize that there was a community of readers passing works around informally even before there was a publisher or any of the institutions that conventionally support literature:

So—you had a physical community [of readers], like a book community. Same thing—similar story—with Jane [Yellowlees] Douglas when she first called me up and said I'm writing my dissertation on *afternoon*. I said, "That's impossible, you can't be, it's not published." She said, "Well, no, but I have it, you know. I've gotten it through so-and-so." So we were pretty much aware there was a community of readers out there. (Redwine 2009)

By the late eighties, several tools were available for creating electronic literature, including HyperCard and Storyspace. Additionally, many practitioners did their own programming, such as Nichols, Malloy and Rosenberg.

Eastgate became a central node in the hypertext fiction communities, as the primary publisher of literary hypertext. In an interview with Judy Malloy, Bernstein explained that he saw one of Eastgate's goals as providing shared references for the growing hypertext research community. The hypertext research field was growing, but before the web it was characterised by diverse, locally developed authoring systems. By publishing a series of hypertext fictions written in the same system, Eastgate managed to create a shared set of references: "These hypertexts helped focus discussion. For the first time, if you and I wanted to talk about the craft of hypertext writing, we could talk about a specific work we'd both read, a work with some ambition and scope, a work we could admire and with which we might disagree" (Malloy and Bernstein 2010).

As previously mentioned, Eastgate succeeded in creating what we may call a canon of electronic literature, and works published by Eastgate in the early 1990s are still taught and written about today. At the time, there were other publishers, including Voyager and Electronic Hollywood, but they no longer exist, whereas Eastgate, small as it is, and by no means mainstream, is still selling copies of those same hypertexts. Eastgate has been frequently criticised because it does not make works available on the web but instead only distribute works on disk, and because works have not always remained accessible on current operating systems. However, it is clear that works published by Eastgate in the early 1990s are far more frequently cited and taught today than contemporaneous works that were self-published or published by publishers that later shut down.

In addition to publishing Storyspace works, Eastgate also published works written in other authoring systems, and in some cases, ported work written in other systems to Storyspace. For instance, Malloy's *Penelope* was first written in BASIC, but Bernstein gave it the "Storyspace look and feel" and incorporated generative aspects of the work into Storyspace when the work was republished by Eastgate in 1993 (Malloy, email to author). In this way, Eastgate served to gather much diverse activity, incorporating earlier works into its catalog, including pioneering authors on The WELL like Judy Malloy and Jim Rosenberg.

At the same time, hypertext fiction was beginning to enter the college classroom. Among the most well-known teachers of hypertext of the time were George Landow and Robert Coover at Brown University, and Janet Murray who taught at MIT at the time. Landow, Coover and Murray wrote extensively about the field as well (Landow's book *Hypertext* was published in three editions, each about a decade apart), and each is frequently cited.

This is the period before the web took over as the main communication channel for authors and readers of electronic literature, and the period before dedicated organisations and events such as the Electronic Literature Organisation or the E-Poetry series had been established. Although the internet existed, and some authors were connected to each other through bulletin board systems such as The WELL, the version of this history that we hear the most frequently centres around the publication of a few, very heavily cited key works, by a single publisher, Eastgate. The period has been called "the Storyspace school" (Aarseth 1997, 85; Hayles 2007) or "the Storyspace era" (Raley 2002, 194; Kirschenbaum 2008), because the field was dominated by works written in the Storyspace software and published by Eastgate. As we have seen, this may not have been entirely true, but this is how the period looked in hindsight. Later, Coover dubbed these pre-web years "the golden age" (Coover 1999), in part because of the dominance of text. Early hypertext fictions, Coover wrote, gave careful readers a sense of "losing oneself to a text (..) until clicking the mouse is as unconscious an act as turning a page, and much less constraining, more compelling." (Coover 1999)

The web may bring with it a different kind of electronic literature and different conditions for readers, but more importantly for this paper, it brings with it very different affordances for writers and readers to communicate with each other. Communities can grow very differently on the web than they could before it.

Five Categories

Why are certain works more frequently cited than others? One likes to assume that it is the best works that are remembered, but contextual circumstances are also extremely important, and it is the context and the community I am interested in in this paper. Thinking about which works of early electronic literature are remembered today we can see five categories. These categories do not correspond to genres or literary qualities, but to the ways in which works were disseminated, documented and preserved.

1. There are many examples of *isolated experiments* that are regularly offered as examples of protohypertext or very early electronic literature, although they are more often mentioned as part of an obligatory literature review at the start of a paper than they are analysed or discussed in detail.
2. The second category of early electronic literature is *the canon*, as we might call it, the works that have been taught again and again in colleges and universities and that are frequently mentioned and discussed in scholarly works on the field. These correspond to a selection of what several authors have called "the Storyspace school".
3. *Works published by now defunct publishers* may have received some critical acclaim at the time, but are no longer available and are rarely if ever mentioned in current discourse on electronic literature.

4. *Self-published works*. Many of these works are no longer available, either because the website has not been maintained, or because the software or the web browser required to view the work is not compatible with current systems. Whether or not the author had other connections to the field is important here.
5. Some works, as today, were *performed* on an electronic network (as was the first publication of Judy Malloy's *Uncle Roger* in 1986, when nuggets of text were posted to discussion boards), and so of course can no longer be experienced as originally intended. There have been many works since that require synchronous experience, or that can be said to be performed as much as they are published. Works that are sent to mailing lists or that are told as a series of emails or tweets and other social networks are examples, and so are works that are constructed in MOOs, such as Coover and his students' *Hypertext Hotel* or the literary environments in *LambdaMOO* in the early 1990s. Without careful documentation, such works are easily forgotten, as they, unlike static websites or CD-ROMs, do not exist in their original form after their original performance.

What is a community?

What is a literary community? Traditional communities are defined by geography. A village grows around bountiful farmland, a city is strategically built by a natural harbour. Today families move to a suburb centered around a school and shops. Traditionally, people socialised, worked and made art with the people who lived nearby.

Communication technology allows for collaboration across distances, outside of the immediate, geographically defined community. The technologies of print and reliable postal service allowed literature, letters and newspapers to circulate among people with shared interests who lived far apart, allowing even a person living far from hubs of literary activity a certain amount of access to intellectual and artistic debates. Literary art forms are generally designed to be portable. We do not think of a novel as losing important context if it is read in Northern Norway instead of in Paris, whereas a painter or musician was forced to travel to where the exhibitions and concerts were to experience them.

Distributed literary and artistic communities, then, have existed to some extent since print and postal services made them possible. But most artistic communities have had a physical centre or centres as well. Artists and musicians have at different times in history known that to make it they must go to Berlin, or Paris, or Rome, or New York. Authors of electronic literature can connect online instead, meeting occasionally at gatherings or conferences.

Today the field of electronic literature is still not mainstream or familiar to a general audience, but there are many well-established meeting points both online and off: there are conferences, journals, mailing lists, blogs and research projects. There are universities that offer courses and degrees in electronic literature and anthologies that suggest a canon of important works.

Conclusion

The works of electronic literature that are still remembered from the 1980s have enjoyed the attention, as it were, of scholars, publishers, teachers and authors who have remained in the field for a long time.

Although Eastgate did not begin publishing hypertext fiction and poetry until 1990s, it is the Eastgate versions of earlier, self-published works that are still remembered. Works published on now-defunct publishers are orphaned and rarely discussed, largely because they are no longer accessible. At the same time, the social networks around conferences and teaching institutions were key, as were online groups such as the ArtCom forum on the WELL. These online groups may no longer be remembered by many, but they served to connect authors and artists who then went on to receive a wider audience. I have not found any examples of solely self-published works that have been continuously discussed in the two decades of scholarship and teaching since the 1980s, although some workshave been recently revived and made accessible again and are now receiving new attention, such as bp Nichol's BASIC poems.

Working on this short article I have realised how much more there is to learn about these early days of hypertext and electronic literature. I hope to interview more of the actors and gather more information about the period, which is key to understanding the emergence of electronic literature, but also valuable in understanding the broader ways in which creative and artistic communities emerge. What appears clear at this point is that works that were self-published have tended to be forgotten. Whether this is simply because they cease to be available or because they were never much discussed due to a lack of social and artistic connections (i.e. nobody was aware of the works in the first place) is not easy to ascertain as the discussions, online or off, of the time are not generally archived. Of course, publishing with an established publisher was no guarantee for being written into the history books either. Voyager was a far larger company than Eastgate in the early 1990s, and many works published by them received great critical acclaim at the time, but their works are no longer available. With the advent of the web, these dynamics changed significantly, and today we also have many conferences, journals, college classes and organisations focused on electronic literature.

What, I wonder, will determine which electronic literature of today is still discussed in twenty years?

Acknowledgements and further information

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