

Stop Making Sense

A guided tour to the World Wide Web

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Towards the end of William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* the computer hacker, Case, talks about reading with a software trafficker called the Finn: "Can you read my mind, Finn?" He grimaced. "Wintermute, I mean." "Minds aren't read. See, you've still got the paradigms print gave you, and you're barely print-literate. I can access your memory, but that's not the same as your mind."¹ This passage reveals quite a lot about the impact of information technology on our ideas about print literacy. What does it mean, for instance, to 'access' something rather than to 'read' it?

Reading involves a conceptual engagement with words or other meaningful signs. It is a process of decoding and reassembling information, a private ritual of world formation rather like the role played by the imagination in consciousness itself. Accessing assumes a different sort of relationship between subject and object. We don't say that we are 'accessing' *Pride and Prejudice* when we hold the book in our hands. But if you wanted to read *Pride and Prejudice* on the World Wide Web you would have to access it first by typing in the address

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~churchh/pridprej.html>

—an act of technological retrieval quite different from buying or borrowing a Penguin Classic.

In book culture a literary text is a physical object that resides on a shelf and can be located by an ISBN or Dewey Decimal System number. In electronic culture the literary text is not a physical object, nor is it physically located. Electronic books are designated (rather than located) by a URL (uniform resource locator) which instructs your web browser (say, Netscape Navigator or MS Explorer) to go to another computer and gain entrance to a site, or packet of computer memory, where the book is stored.

In a sense, it is inappropriate to speak of books at all in the electronic environment. In the age of electronic communications, literary forms such as novels or poetry are constituted *potentially*. An electronic text is a temporary whole with no physical status; it exists in a latent state as abstract digital information or combinations of ones and zeros. These data occupy space as so many bytes of memory on a mainframe computer or network server. They are dormant and meaningless until they are accessed via a command resulting in their transmission to another computer on the network. Then they are reconstructed on a screen as pixels, which we finally recognize as the unique sequence of words signified by the title *Pride and Prejudice*. Electronic texts are virtual, transient manifestations that come and go on the surface of a screen.

Hypertext, then, entails a shift in the material conditions under which we experience works of literature, and one for which revolutionary claims are now often made. How does hypertext affect the act of reading literature? Do electronic writing technologies such as hypertext *soup up* the reading process and transform the nature of the literary experience? Arguments that hypertext invites 'power reading' are widespread, and a discussion of some of these issues can be found at

<http://lydia.bradley.edu/interlabs/391/hyper.html>

and

<http://www.duke.edu/~mshumate/theory.html>

See for instance the essays by Howard Becker and Jay David Bolter, which suggest that hypertext empowers the reader as an agent or

creative force in the construction of literary experience.

It is important to see sites (rather than simply read about them) because the experience of Web-browsing dramatizes the impact of hypertext on our normal reading practices. Navigating the Web is a hypertextual experience. The link from

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to

<http://www.duke.edu/~mshumate/theory.html>

for instance, leads to a multitude of tangential connections and provides a glimpse of the electronic world. Hypertext literally means extended text and refers to a process of embedding material. There are no endpoints and no conclusions; in this world of missives and data exchange the final delivery of the message to an ultimate destination is indefinitely suspended.

But hypertext also represents choice to the nth degree and a capacity, undreamed of in the book age, to synthesize eclectic material. A Lycos search for information on hypertext yields '8521 relevant documents from a total of 60,434,860 indexed Web pages' (as at 1300 hours, EST, 8/12/96). Power reading or information overload? You decide.

The sites you have already encountered at 'The Hypertext Revolution' will enable you to construct a typology of hypertext. From the 'Page to Screen' link in 'Hyperizons' you will find the most basic literary application of hypertext, what I describe as benign hypertext—that is, fiction converted to hypertext form using HTML (hypertext markup language). In the case of something like *Pride and Prejudice*, hypertext doesn't add anything to our engagement with the novel as literature, but instead combines the literary experience with the scholiast's interest in footnotes, textual and biographical marginalia and literary motifs (follow the link from 'your letter' in volume III, chapter 52 and see where it takes you).

This is the use of electronic technology that would have appealed to Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, the great cross-referencers of literature. You can pursue the French link in Raymond Queneau's

'As You Like it', another marked-up version of a printed text, whose title is suggestive of hypertext's interactive potential. 'As You Like It' reveals a more active, dramatic form of the genre, offering a series of possible stories, the choice and order of which depend upon decisions made by the reader (note that there are two versions of the story: 'interactive' and 'self-writing').

Queneau's experiments with indeterminacy and chance were fundamental to the original story when it was first published in 1969. Not surprisingly, indeterminacy features strongly in the forms of hypertext written directly for the electronic environment using software such as Hypercard or HTML. Unlike a book, which can only ever take you to the next page, a hypertext document can be programmed to take you to anywhere within the document or to a different document altogether.

The best known work to exploit the fluidity of HTML is Michael Joyce's 'Afternoon', described by the American writer Robert Coover as the 'granddaddy of hypertext fiction'. A sample 'teaser' of this work can be accessed from the 'Fiction by Individual Authors' directory of 'Hyperizons'—the full version for Mac or PC can be ordered from Eastgate Systems at

http://www.eastgate.com/products/Cat_Fictions.html#afternoon

Every reader of 'Afternoon' determines how the story develops, and no two readings are likely to be the same. The unpredictability of the text arises from the density of possible links between a finite set of narrative elements.

'Afternoon' manifests the most dramatic aspect of hypertext—synopation. In contrast to concatenation, which refers to the logical, chronological and causal relationships of items in a narrative, synopation refers to unexpected moments of emphasis, the introduction of random elements and the reduction of narrative structure to the contingencies of a particular performance or reading. An example is Stuart Moulthrop and Sean Cohen's multimedia work-in-progress, 'The Color of Television' (also accessed from the 'Fiction by Individual Authors' directory of 'Hyperizons').

'The Color of Television' is a complex mosaic of short nodes, or lexias, comprised of words, images and cryptic symbols. While there

are slivers of narrative content, you are always tempted to follow embedded fragments (signalled by hot spots) that transmit you to an adjacent part of the narrative that may or may not have immediate relevance to the passage you were reading. Syncopated narrative structure is rather like collage in the visual arts, montage in film, or counterpoint in music and requires the reader to develop a style of reading and comprehension that can accommodate lateral associations between ideas.

Making sense and keeping track of lateral sequences of thought is the real challenge. Hypertext invites you into the labyrinth, encouraging you to follow the digressions and dead ends. There is always the anxiety that the entire experience isn't going to make much sense. (Indeed, the Talking Heads' 'Stop Making Sense' is hypertext's signature tune, echoing William Burroughs' famous adage, 'Exterminate all rational thought.')

In many respects the literary experience of hypertext revisits the anti-aesthetics of the modernist avant-garde, of writers such as Mallarmé, Joyce, Beckett and Burroughs. As Susan Sontag observed of this counter-tradition of 'programmatically avant-gardism', it entailed a shift from a rational interpretation of art to a 'willing acquiescence in the amorphous, inarticulate play of meaning and sense'.²

While electronic hypertext extends the boundaries of writing into the realm of the virtual, its audience faces the same compromise in intelligibility encountered by readers of experimental works. We can make as many syncopated jumps and links as we like, but our ability to hold all of these links in our mind is limited. The logic of hypertext promises an alternative kind of sense, in which disparate things are yoked together in an ever-expanding universe of reference.

Contrary to all the rhetoric, the software that drives hypertext is still bound by the two-dimensionality of the screen. Hypertext is still a linear form and will continue to be until it can find a way of enabling the reader to keep all the links in mind at one time. This is the 'allatonce-ness' described by Marshall McLuhan in 1967, in which the viewer is bombarded by information at speeds too fast to apprehend.³ Hypertext is at the moment no better than the printed book at accommodating this volume of information.

Like a book, a virtual text can only ever present the reader with part of a much larger, unseen whole. Combination of a text's

multiple parts involves the negotiation through time of different locations—whether among the linked documents in the electronic environment or the printed pages of a book. In this sense, electronic hypertext is more like a book than anything else, since the very principle of making a link from one node to another is like turning a page. Similarly, the practice of embedding the hypertextual page with unseen but anchored links (usually identified by a highlighted word or object) is a variation on the principle of the footnote.

Hypertext continues, rather than initiates, a tradition of synco-pated writing. The 'Precursors of Hypertext' directory of 'Hyperizons' acknowledges this literary inheritance, as does the useful hypertext resource 'The Electronic Labyrinth' at

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/elab/hfi0276.html>

Terms such as 'hyperbook', 'polytext' and 'hyperfiction' are merely catchy tags that do little more than signal the electronic duplication of experimental narrative practices first developed in book culture. Indeed, one type of hyperfiction, the 'tree structure', is modelled on Jorge Luis Borges' metaphor of the garden of forking paths, in which stories not only go on indefinitely due to persistent embedding, but move perpetually towards 'innumerable futures'.⁴ And the fact that we now have an HTML Writers' Guild (see 'The Hypertext Revolution') suggests that electronic writing is adopting more and more features of the very culture it is claiming to supersede.

NOTES

- 1 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (HarperCollins, London, 1993), p. 204.
- 2 Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 101.
- 3 Marshall McLuhan with Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage. An Inventory of Effects* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967), p. 63.
- 4 Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in *Labyrinths* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 53.