In the Garden of Forking Paths:

Contingency, Interactivity and Play in Hypertext

- Belinda Barnet
- Respond To This Article

Volume 1 | Issue 5 | Dec, 1998

"Interactivity implies two agencies in conversation, playfully and spontaneously developing a mutual discourse" -- Sandy Stone (11)

I. On Interactivity

The difference between interactivity as it is performed across the page and the screen, maintains Sandy Stone, is that virtual texts and virtual communities can embody a play ethic (14). Inserted like a mutation into the corporate genome, play ruptures the encyclopaedic desire to follow seamless links to a buried 'meaning' and draws us back to the surface, back into real-time conversation with the machine. Hypertext theorists see this as a tactic of resistance to homogenisation. As we move across a hypertextual reading space, we produce the text in this unfolding now, choosing pathways which form a map in the space of our own memories: where we have been, where we are, where we might yet be. Play is occupying oneself with diversions.

II. Space, Time and Composition

Reading in time, we create the text in the space of our own memories. Hypertext theorists maintain that the choices we make around every corner, the spontaneity and contingency involved in these choices, are the bringing into being of a (constantly replaced) electronic palimpsest, a virtual geography. The dislocation which occurs as we engage in nodal leaps draws us back to the surface, rupturing our experience of the narrative and bringing us into a blissful experience of possibility.

III. War against the Line

There is the danger, on the one hand, of being subsumed by the passive subject position demanded by infotainment culture and the desire it encourages to seek the satisfaction of closure by following seamless links to a buried 'meaning'. On the other hand, we risk losing efficiency and control over the unfolding interaction by entering into an exchange which disorientates us with infinite potential. We cannot wildly destratify. The questions we ask must seek to keep the conversation open.

In order to establish a new discursive territory within which to understand this relationship, we should view the interface not simply as a transparency which enables interaction with the machine as 'other', but as a text, a finely-wrought behavioural map which "exists at the intersection of political and ideological boundary lands" (Selffe & Selffe 1). As we write, so are we written by the linguistic contact zones of this terrain. Hypertext is thus a process involving the active translation of modes of being into possible becomings across the interface.

The geographic 'space' we translate into a hypertext "is imaginational... . We momentarily extend the linear reading act into a third dimension when we travel a link" (Tolva 4). A literal spatial representation would break from the realm of hypertext and become a virtual reality. Thus, the geographic aspect is not inherent to the system itself but is partially translated into the geometry of the medium via our experience and perception (the 'map'), a process describing our 'line of flight' as we evolve in space. Directional flows between time and its traditional subordination to space in representation implode across the present-tense of the screen and time literally surfaces. Our experience of the constantly-replaced electronic palimpsest is one of temporal surrender: "we give in to time, we give way to time, we give in with time" (Joyce 219). In other words, the subject of hypertext
subverts the traditional hierarchy and writes for space, producing the ‘terrain’ in the unfolding now in the Deleuzian sense, not in space as desired by the State.

Johnson-Eilola aligns the experience of hypertext with the Deleuzian War Machine, a way of describing the speed and range of virtual movement created when the animal body splices into the realm of technology and opens an active plane of conflict. The War Machine was invented by the nomads -- it operates by continual deterritorialisation in a tension-limit with State science, what we might call the command-control drive associated with geometric, dynamic thought and the sedentary culture of the Line. It "exemplifies" the avant-garde mentality that hypertext theorists have been associating with the electronic writing space (Moulthrop, "No War Machine" 1). Playing outside.

The States desires an end to the resistance to totalisation promulgated by contingent thought and its thermodynamic relationship to space: the speed which assumes a probabilistic, vortical motion, actually drawing smooth space itself. The war machine is thus an open system opposed to classical mechanics via its grounding in active contingencies and spatio-temporal production. The nomad reads and writes for space, creating the temporal text in the space of her own memory, giving way to time and allowing existent points to lapse before the trajectory of flight. Nomad thought is not dependent on any given theory of relationship with the medium, but works via disruption and (re)distribution, the gaps, stutterings and gasp-like expressions experienced when we enter into conversation with the hypertext.

The danger is that the war machine might be appropriated by the State, at which point this light-speed communication becomes of the utmost importance in the war against space and time. As speed and efficient retrieval replace real-space across the instantaneity and immediacy of the terminal, the present-time sensory faculties of the individual are marginalised as incidental and she becomes "the virtual equivalent of the well-equipped invalid" (Virilio 5). In other words, as the frame of real-space and present-time disappears, the text of the reader/writer becomes "sutured" into the discourse of the State, the only goal to gain "complete speed, to cover territory in order for the State to subdivide and hold it through force, legislation or consent" (Virilio, qtd. in Johnson-Eilola).

This is when the predetermined geometry of hypertext becomes explicit. The progressive subsumption (or "suturing") of the multiple, nomadic self into the discourse of the computer occurs when "the terms of the narrative are heightened, as each 'node' in the hypertext points outwards to other nodes [and] readers must compulsively follow links to arrive at the 'promised plenitude' at the other end of the link" (Johnson-Eilola 391). When we no longer reflect on the frame and move towards complete speed and efficiency, when we stop playing on the surface and no longer concern ourselves with diversion, the war machine has been appropriated by the State. In this case, there is no revolutionary 'outside' to confront in interaction, as all has been marshalled towards closure.

Keeping the conversation open means continuously reflecting on the frame. We cannot wildly destratify and lose control entirely by moving in perpetual bewilderment, but we can see the incompleteness of the story, recognising the importance of local gaps and spaces. We can work with the idea that the "dyad of smooth/striated represents not a dialectic but a continuum" (Moulthrop, "Rhizome" 317) that can be turned more complex in its course. Contingency and play reside in the intermezzo, the "dangerous edges, fleeting, attempting to write across the boundaries between in-control and out-of-control" (Johnson-Eilola 393). The war machine exists as at once process and product, the translation between smooth-striated moving in potentia: the nomadic consciousness can recognise this process and live flux as reality itself, or consistency.

In sum, we avoid subsumption and appropriation by holding open the function of the text as process in our theorising, in our teaching, in our reading and writing across the hypertextual environment. We can either view hypertext as a tool or product which lends itself to efficient, functional use (to organise information, to control and consume in an encyclopaedic fashion), or we can view it as a process which lends itself to nomadic thought and resistance to totalisation in syncopated flows, in cybernetic fits and starts. This is our much-needed rhetoric of activity.

IV. An Alternative Story

No matter their theoretical articulation, such claims made for hypertext are fundamentally concerned with escaping the logocentric geometry of regulated time and space. Recent explorations deploying the Deleuzian smooth/striated continuum make explicit
the fact that the enemy in this literary 'war' has never been the Line or linearity per se, but "the nonlinear perspective of geometry; not the prison-house of time but the fiction of transcendence implied by the indifferent epistemological stance toward time" (Rosenberg 276). Although the rhizome, the war machine, the cyborg and the nomad differ in their particularities and composition, they all explicitly play on the dislocated, time-irreversible processes of chaos theory, thermodynamics and associated 'liberatory' topological perspectives. Rosenberg's essay makes what I consider to be a very disruptive point: hypertext merely simulates the 'smooth', contingent thought seen to be antithetical to regulated space-time and precise causality due to its fundamental investment in a regulated, controlled and (pre)determined geometry. Such a deceptively smooth landscape is technonarcissistic in that its apparent multiplicity actually prescribes to a totality of command-control.

Hypertext theorists have borrowed the terms 'multilinear', 'nonlinear' and 'contingency' from physics to articulate hypertext's resistance to the dominant determinist episteme, a framework exemplified by the term 'dynamics', opposing it to "the irreversible laws characteristic of statistical approximations that govern complex events, exemplified by the term, 'thermodynamics'" (Rosenberg 269). This resistance to the time-reversible, non-contingent and totalised worldview has its ideological origins in the work of the avant-garde.

Hypertext theorists are fixated with quasi-hypertextual works that were precursors to the more 'explicitly' revolutionary texts in the electronic writing space. In the works of the avant-garde, contingency is associated with creative freedom and subversive, organic logic. It is obsessively celebrated by the likes of Pynchon, Joyce, Duchamp and Cage. Hypertext theorists have reasoned from this that 'nonlinear' or 'multilinear' access to information is isomorphic with such playful freedom and its contingent, associative leaps. Theorists align this nonsequential reasoning with a certain rogue logic: the 'fluid nature of thought itself' exemplified by the explicitly geographic relationship to space-time of the Deleuzian rhizome and the notion of contingent, probabilistic 'becomings'. Hypertext participates fully in the spatio-temporal dialectic of the avant-garde.

As Moulthrop observes, the problem with this is that from a topological perspective, 'linear' and 'multilinear' are identical: "lines are still lines, logos and not nomos, even when they are embedded in a hypertextual matrix" ("Rhizome" 310). The spatio-temporal dislocations which enable contingent thought and 'subversive' logic are simply not sustained through the reading/writing experience. Hypertextual links are not only reversible in time and space, but trace a detached path through functional code, each new node comprising a carefully articulated behavioural 'grammar' that the reader adjusts to. To assume that by following 'links' and engaging in disruptive nodal leaps a reader might be resisting the framework of regulated space-time and determinism is "to ignore how, once the dislocation occurs, a normalcy emerges ... as the hypertext reader acclimates to the new geometry or new sequence of lexias" (Rosenberg 283).

Moreover, the searchpath maps which earlier theorists had sensed were antithetical to smooth space actually exemplify the element of transcendent control readers have over the text as a whole. "A reader who can freeze the text, a reader who is aware of a Home button, a reader who can gain an instant, transcendent perspective of the reading experience, domesticates contingencies" (Rosenberg 275). The visual and behavioural grammar of hypertext is one of transcendent control and determined response. Lines are still lines -- regulated, causal and not contingent -- even when they are 'constructed' by an empowered reader.

Hypertext is thus invested (at least in part) in a framework of regularity, control and precise function. It is inextricably a part of State apparatus. The problem with this is that the War Machine, which best exemplifies the avant-garde's insurgency against sedentary culture, must be exterior to the State apparatus and its regulated grid at all times. "If we acknowledge this line of critique (which I think we must), then we must seriously reconsider any claims about hypertext fiction as War Machine, or indeed as anything en avant" (Moulthrop, "No War Machine" 5).

Although hypertext is not revolutionary, it would be the goal of any avant-garde use of hypertext to find a way to sustain the experience of dislocation that would indicate liberation from the hegemony of geometry. I would like to begin to sketch the possibility of 'contingent interaction' through the dislocations inherent to alternative interfaces later in this story. For the time being, however, we must reassess all our liberation claims. If linearity and multilinearity are identical in terms of geometric relations to space-time, "why should they be any different in terms of ideology", asks Moulthrop ("Rhizome" 310).
V. On Interactivity

Given Rosenberg’s critique against any inherently revolutionary qualities, we must acknowledge that hypermedia "marks not a terminus but a transition," Moulthrop writes ("Rhizome" 317). As a medium of exchange it is neither smooth nor striated, sophist nor socratic, 'work' nor 'text': it is undergoing an increasingly complex phase transition between such states. This landscape also gives rise to stray flows and intensities, 'Unspecified Enemies' which exist at the dangerous fissures and edges. We must accept that we will never escape the system, but we are presented with opportunities to rock the sedentary order from within.

As a group of emerging electronic artists see it, the dis-articulation of the point'n'click interface is where interaction becomes reflection on the frame in fits and starts. "We believe that the computer, like everything else, is composed in conflict," explain the editors of electronic magazine I/O/D. "If we are locked in with the military and with Disney, they are locked in not just with us, but with every other stray will-to-power" (Fuller, Interview 2). Along with Adelaide-based group Mindflux, these artists produce hypertext interfaces that involve sensory apparatus and navigational skills that have been marginalised as incidental in the disabling interactive technologies of mainstream multimedia. Sound, movement, proprioception, an element of randomness and assorted other sensory circuits become central to the navigational experience. By enlisting marginalised senses, "we are not proposing to formulate a new paradigm of multimedial correctness," stresses Fuller, "but simply exploring the possibility of more complicated feedback arrangements between the user and the machine" (Fuller, qtd. in Barnet 48). The reader must encounter the 'lexias' contained in the system via the stray flows, intensities, movements, stratas and organs that are not proper to the system but shift across the interface and the surface of her body.

In Fuller's electronic magazine, the reader is called upon to converse with the technology outside of the domesticated circuits of sight, dislocating the rigorous hierarchy of feedback devices which privilege the sight-machine and disable contingent interaction in a technonarcissistic fashion. The written information is mapped across a 'fuzzy' sound-based interface, sensitive at every moment to the smallest movements of the reader's fingers on the keys and mouse: the screen itself is black, its swarm of links and hotspots dead to the eye. The reader's movements produce different bleeps and beats, each new track opening different entrances and exits through the information in dependence upon the fluctuating pitch and tempo of her music. Without the aid of searchpaths and bright links, she must move in a state of perpetual readjustment to the technology, attuned not to the information stored behind the interface, but to the real-time sounds her movements produce.

What we are calling play, Fuller explains, "is the difference between something that has a fixed grammar on the one hand and something that is continually and openly inventing its own logic on the other" (Fuller & Pope 4). The electronic writing space is not inherently liberatory, and the perpetual process of playing with process across the interface works to widen the 'fissures across the imperium' only for a moment. According to Fuller and Joyce, the 'process of playing with process' simply means complicating the feedback arrangements between the user's body and the machine.

"We need to find a way of reading sensually ... rather than, as the interactive artist Graham Weinbren puts it, descending 'into the pit of so-called multimedia, with its scenes of unpleasant 'hotspots,' and 'menus' [that] leaves no room for the possibility of a loss of self, of desire in relation to the unfolding" remarks Joyce (11). Interactivity which calls upon a mind folded everywhere within the body dislocates the encyclopaedic organisation of data that "preserves a point of privilege from where the eye can frame objects" by enlisting itinerant, diffuse desires in an extended period of readjustment to technology (Fuller & Pope 3). There are no pre-ordained or privileged feedback circuits as the body is seen to comprise a myriad possible elements or fragments of a desiring-machine with the potential to disrupt the flow, to proliferate.

Mainstream multimedia's desire for 'informational hygiene' would have us transcend this embodied flux and bureaucratise the body into organs. Information is fed through the circuits of sight in a Pavlovian field of buttons and bright links: interactivity is misconceived as choice-making, when 'response' is a more appropriate concept. When the diffuse desire which thrives on disruption and alternative paradigms is written out in favour of informational hygiene, speed and efficient retrieval replace embodied conversation. "Disembodied [interaction] of this kind is always a con... . The entropic, troublesome flesh that is sloughed off in these fantasies of strongly male essentialism is interwoven with the
dynamics of self-processing cognition and intentionality. We see computers as embodied culture, hardwired epistemology" (Fuller 2). Avant-garde hypertext deepens the subjective experience of the human-computer interface: it inscribes itself across the diffuse, disruptive desires of the flesh.

Alternative interfaces are not an ideological overhaul enabled by the realm of technê, but a space for localised break-outs across the body. Bifurcations are enacted on the micro level by desiring-machines, across an interface which seeks to dislocate intentionality in conjunction with the marginalised sensory apparatus of the reader, drawing other minds, other organs into localised conversation with command-control. "The user learns kinesthetically and proprioceptively that the boundaries of self are defined less by the skin than by the [local] feedback loops connecting body and simulation in a techno-bio-integrated circuit" (Hayles 72). She oscillates between communication and control, play and restraint: not a nomad but a "human Deserter assuming the most diverse forms" (ATP, 422).

VI. Desire

Working from across the territory we have covered, we might say that electronic interaction 'liberates' us from neither the Line nor the flesh: at its most experimental, it is nothing less than reading embodied.

References


Citation reference for this article

MLA style:


Chicago style:


APA style:

...media-culture.org.au/.../garden.php
<http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/9812/garden.php> ([your date of access]).