

УДК 610.14.18

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HYPERFICTION: THE AMBIGUITIES OF NON-LINEAR TEXT

The article is devoted to the actual problem of informational technologies usage and possibilities of their integration into the studying process. This usage favours the effectiveness in the solution of deductive aims at English language lessons. The author also determines the expediency and specific character of informational resources usage while working with fictional hypertext.

Key words: informational technologies, hypertext, fictional, textuality, modeling technology.

The problem. The access of computer to the large corpora of literary texts together with techniques for examining them and the building of hypertext and hypermedia systems brought out the issue of hyperfiction.

Analyses. More texts are becoming available to the scholarly community in machine readable form, whether from text archives or commercial distributors who have released a comprehensive database users of such texts, however, are still confined largely to a small and specialized research community, with the technical skills to make use of electronic text. The notable absence so far of computer-assisted research in the leading scholarly journals is one sign that the field is still marginal. As we will suggest, there are reasons for this that go beyond mere notion, although this too has played a part in slowing the emergence of the field into the mainstream.

This article **aims** to provide a general background to the discussion of how, in broad terms, ruling hypertext theory has influenced most hyperfictions either to presuppose a highbrow reader with a penchant for postmodern writing or to disregard the reader completely in a theory-dictated quest for poststructuralist-inspired ideals. Main traits of hyperfiction and the elements that are essential in shaping the hypertext reading experience are to be introduced. More precisely, this will involve a look at reader types, main distinguishing traits of hyperfiction and hypertext writing techniques. Lastly it will consider questions concerning conventions within hyperfiction.

The main material. Speaking about hypertext reader types we should say that the hypertext reader bounces back and forth between the lexias, in a kind of playing with paths, which may lead him in several directions and not just «forward» in the traditional, linear sense. Hyperfiction's network structure, with its touch of labyrinthine gaming, encourages ludic reading, with playful and spontaneous choosing of links in a search for instant gratification. But reading hyperfiction is in many instances made to be serious work where the reader is presented with long lexias full of meta-fictional musing, literary theory philosophising and aggravating, seemingly random choices. This kind of hyperfiction, which is the most common kind on the Internet, tends to be extremely ambiguous and taciturn. They sometimes seem to reduce the reader's role to that of a rat in a labyrinth, trying to locate sparse pieces of meaning. As reported in some reader studies, the reader is often forced to click links randomly and give up on making any meaning in the obscure chunks of text he encounters in some hypertexts.

Hyperfiction, which can allegedly liberate readers from the constraints of print, often becomes too constraining for many readers when their only option is to follow the linked paths

the author has prepared. Some readers refuse to read for very long when the reading brings them no rewards, that is, when it does not allow them to construct a reasonable explanation for the events of the fiction.

One of the reasons for the high level of ambiguity in many hyperfictions, is that many hypertext enthusiasts believe that we have become too used to just lying back and letting others paint the whole picture for us, and «what we are used to we often become used by» as the hypertext writer and theorist Michael Joyce says [3, p. 56]. They believe that hypertext can change what they believe are inactive, routine reading patterns.

Hypertext does seem to possess the right features for disturbing the reader's expectations. It occupies new «writing spaces» as Bernstein calls it and in these new writing spaces the reader often becomes much more conscious about his own situation and the text's status. He is rarely suspending his disbelief, but is more likely to remain detached and critical of the text because the necessity to choose links and the new reading situation make it more difficult for him to float along with the streaming fiction and forget about reality. The choosing requires more «work» than just leafing through a steady stream of words that somehow seems to be arranged in their only «natural» sequence. Additionally, the hypertext reader must to a higher degree consider formal aspects, like text structure. The formal aspects are not as fixed as in print literature, and all the novel ways of structuring the text inevitably make the interpretation more complicated [1, p. 51].

Whether the hyperfiction reading experience is rewarding or not greatly depends on how well the text and the reader type correspond. General hypertext theory has tended to assume a reader that is adventurous, intellectual and patient. More precisely, the ideal reader for the enthusiasts seems to be someone who enjoys recognising and playing with postmodern, stylistic elements in an electronic environment. He is a heavy user, who reads very thoroughly and patiently, focusing also on the design, and prefers hyperfictions that first and foremost break with traditional literary discourse. The use of this «ideal» reader in hypertext theory is problematic, as readers' interpretative practices and interests in actual fact vary considerably. A few theorists, like David Miall and writers like Mark Bernstein, in contrast, seem to use a more pragmatic approach and consider the average reader. It is crucial to know readers' willingness to read unfamiliar kinds of text in order to avoid writing hyperfictions without any reader appeal that attract no attention whatsoever. By identifying some archetypical reader types, both hypertext writing and theory may become more precise and defined, as there naturally are different conclusions to be made for different reader types [1, p. 16; 5, p. 78].

Unfortunately, theory on reader types in electronic literature is extremely sparse, but a few theorists offer worthwhile words on the subject: The theorist J.M. Slatin has defined two fundamental attitudes towards new media. He calls these two contrasting types inner-directed and other-directed. Inner-directed readers redefine their role as readers by either trying to navigate through narrative space in a new way or by changing their expectations to how narratives should end or if they should end at all. They welcome experimentation with narrative conventions and they thus possess the basic prerequisite for enjoying contemporary hyperfictions. Other-directed readers can only read according to established practices and literary conventions, which leads them to find texts that differ sharply from established norms too experimental and meaningless. In reality, readers' behaviours are of course more sophisticated than that – Slatin's two reader types merely depict the opposite extremes. This rather simple definition is, nevertheless, helpful as a frame within which to plot more complex reader types like those described by J.M. Slatin, another hypertext theorist, writes in an article about three hypertext reader types: the browser, the user, and the co-author [8, p. 46]. His three types are mostly applicable to non-fiction hypertext, but could also suggest possible behaviour patterns when reading hyperfiction. The browser is playful, reading for entertainment and pleasure. He likes being surprised and challenged by a new kind of discourse and it is impossible to predict his course through the material, as he will probably make a virtue out of choosing the least obvious links. It is important, according to Slatin, to provide a «trail of breadcrumbs», a backtracking mechanism (like the «back» button on the Internet) to let him go back when his reckless choices have brought him to something that does not interest him [8, p. 142].

The user has a clear and limited purpose. He is looking for a specific experience or information and leaves the text when he has found what he came for or when the search seems

too unpromising and aimless. He tends to focus on results and not so much on the aesthetic gratification of the words, links or images. He is what Rizh A. would term a «genre reader», someone who reads detective novels, Westerns, romances etc. and he mainly reads for the simple pleasure of immersing himself in the fictional world [7, p. 33]. Most contemporary online hyperfiction will almost certainly not be appreciated by this kind of reader. He would, however, no doubt, be attracted to hyperfictions with clearer stories.

The reader can of course only be what Slatin calls a 'co-author' if the hypertext will let him. Very few hypertexts actually offer the option of adding new lexias to the narrative. Perhaps writers, understandably, are too attached to their creation to let it be «diluted» by more or less artful additions from «co-authors». In any event, there is a contrast between how zealously co-authorship is praised as a revolutionary possibility and the extent to which it is actually practised in Internet texts. As Slatin himself writes: One of the most important differences between conventional text and hypertext is that most hypertext systems, though not all, allow readers to interact with the system to such an extent that some readers may become actively involved in the creation of an evolving hypertext [8, p. 159].

The reader can become a co-author in more or less direct ways. The most direct way to interact is when he is able to change what is already written and add new lexias. He could also just be given access to adding links, or he could just be allowed to email the author with suggestions for further story development, corrections, etc. This last possibility appears to offer the most interesting change: the two first possibilities undoubtedly make access to the work of art too democratic, as illustrated by the poor quality of the collectively written adventures, open to everyone on the Internet. Free writing access to the text seems to dilute any originality and encourage a writing that embodies the lowest common denominator. The email possibility, in contrast, is a good way of giving the reader indirect influence on the text. The author receives the comment or suggestion and then decides if he will implement it. The revolution lies in the swiftness and easiness with which the reader can send a spontaneous reaction to the writer seconds after reading his hyperfiction.

The most relevant hypertext reader type for most hyperfictions is undoubtedly also the most common one, namely the browser, who characterises the reader as player. His reading is as much as for instance at playful, childish exploration of yielding words that momentarily catch his interest, as a reading for the plot. He finds as much pleasure in the exploration of the hyperfiction's structure as in reading the words and therefore is patient, even if the fiction does not bring him what he expected right away [7].

As for the main distinguishing traits of hyperfiction, we should mention that electronic links are what fundamentally distinguishes hyperfiction from fiction. The fact that they allow the narrative to be spread out multilinearly is what generates what theorists have identified as the medium's «unique traits» [2, p.90]. The «unique» or «defining» traits of hypertext are often emphasised as elements that should be central in hypertexts, as they are naturally what can make the reading experience different from that of books [2, p. 92]. That these particular characteristics are important is a fair assumption, but they should not completely dominate the text and be used uncritically as aesthetic goals.

Here follows descriptions of the main effects the hypertext medium tend to have on the reading experience. The technological nature of hypertext is one reason for its atmosphere of unstableness. There is no tangible entity that by its immediate physical presence offers the reader simple access to it. Instead, the reader must access it through a complex system of computer hardware that seems to have power on its own. The feeling that most users have of not fully mastering the medium, is crucial to their experience of working with the texts [6, p. 94]. For example, if reading online texts, they may be forced to helplessly realise that the text they were using is suddenly inaccessible.

Furthermore, hyperfiction can be said to have a less stable content than print literature because it often has a constantly changing centre of narration. It is easier for hypertext authors to use the disruption between each lexia to shift context abruptly and the more autonomous state of each lexia produces many brief centres of narration. A new place or character can suddenly become central in a given lexia, and be insignificant in the next. The reader cannot assume a steady and causal story line and read with a good hunch about how the story will develop and often he cannot be as certain what the main elements of the story are.

The actual impact that the increased instability of the electronic text has on the reader is very difficult to assess. One could compare the electronic reading experience with looking at sand sculptures or words written in sand, because the awareness that it will probably be destroyed as new technology makes it obsolete and links begin to fail contributes to the experience. The observer will often think that it is a pity that it will be erased after all that work and that it should be preserved for more people to see it. Perhaps the viewer for a brief moment feels an urge to save it from destruction. This urge can encourage a more passionate and immediate experience, because it is tied to fragile and transient artworks. Furthermore, the reader's expectations as to how the plot will develop will probably become less precise. The unfamiliarity of this medium will make it all the more unpredictable and he cannot relax his «cognitive muscles» and drift along with the plot as easily as in print literature [4, p. 18].

Hyperfiction is often literally open, that is, without a clear start and end point. The reader stops reading simply when he does not feel like reading it anymore, if the text loops too much, or if it simply becomes too enigmatic and frustrating.

There is a (poststructuralist) consensus among most hypertext theorists and writers (such as Joyce, and Moulthrop) that there should not be any conventional beginning and ending in hypertext. The argument goes that designated beginnings and endings strengthen restrictive enlightenment «virtues» of teleological progression, binary thinking and linearity. In Landow's words «The concepts (and experiences) of beginning and ending imply linearity» [2, p. 77]. Furthermore, borders like a designated «beginning» and «end» help to uphold the illusion that the autonomous, original artwork exists independently of other works. They situate the reader in a hierarchy and works against a «healthy» awareness of the fact that all texts are connected in some way. Furthermore, if there are no borders it lets the reader decide when he thinks the hyperfiction is finished, which may however leave him with the feeling that it is unresolved. Therefore, the inclusion of a starting- and endpoint might not be a bad idea, conventional or not, because it may be the very factor that encloses and resolves the reading experience crucially for readers.

Multilinearity, multivocality and the rapidly changing contexts of diverse lexias often make hypertext reading confusing to a mind accustomed to one-way reading in print. Furthermore, the reader often has no idea how far into the hypertext he is and these new aspects of the reading experience may be undesirable to some readers. Landow observes, «the neophyte or inexperienced reader finds unpleasantly confusing materials that more expert readers find a source of pleasure» [2, p. 117]. The structuralist theorists' belief is that the confusion and lack of smooth coherence may make the experienced reader pause and consider the contexts and implications surrounding his reading. He becomes more detached and alienated and thus more critical towards the text and its attempts to create illusions and «truths» [2, p. 118].

The reader of hyperfiction will often experience a blurring of the identity of who is narrating or which character is speaking. The mix of lexias with different points of view, time and space, may make identities vague and the reading experience very focused on trying to determine who says what. Especially hyperfictions with several authors, like *The Unknown*, make it very difficult to determine who is narrating what. The lexias signal a possible shift in time and place, making it less necessary for the author to describe transitions very clearly in words. This vagueness of identity decreases the author's authority, because his voice does not seem clear and consistent.

This may not necessarily be a general characteristic of hypertext, as it may just be the severe lack of gripping, fast-moving hypertext stories that has led to the almost general assumption that it is inherently anti-immersive. Theorisers, notably Mark Bernstein, the theoriser and director of the CD-based hypertext publishing company Eastgate Systems, and David Miall, tend to believe that links cut any continuous and coherent storyline to pieces, along with any immersion. As a contrast to hypertext's aesthetics, Mark Bernstein uses TV, radio and cinema as instances of what he calls immersive media. Like many other enthusiastic hypertext theorists, Bernstein does not seem to view the supposed anti-immersive qualities of hypertext as a problem [1].

Rules and borders may seem looser in hypertext, but they can also be perceived as being even tighter. The reader cannot turn to a certain passage as easily as in a book and in most hyperfiction the author dictates what paths the reader may take in which order, except in the few hyperfictions, that offer an overview with links to all the links in the story.

It is therefore not necessarily true that hypertext liberates us as readers. It offers us new ways of reading, but it also limits some reading processes connected with book reading. In Miall's essay he comments on Jay David Bolter's description of Derrida's *Glas* as a hypertext ahead of its time. In *Glas* Derrida divided the page into two columns: one with extracts from and comments on Hegel and the opposite one with writing by Genet and comments on him. Bolter, as cited by Miall, then describes how the reader can scan the text and see how «connections seem to be there, as words and sentence fragments refer the reader back and forth between Hegel and Genet» [5, p. 116]. Bolter claims that hypertext is the perfect medium for a text like *Glas*. He believes «any relationships between textual elements can float to the surface» [5, p. 117]. However, as Miall observes, once the links are specified they limit the reader's inner interaction with the text. Miall puts it a little too categorically: «the infinite possibilities of response by each reader are limited to the few links prepared by the hypertext designer» [5, p. 162]. It seems plausible that some readers are capable of reading the text on the screen without letting the links «get to them». They may read the text as traditional text, make their own inferences and then use the added dimension that links bring to it. The links should look inconspicuous, in order to give the reader peace to make his own connections as well. Perhaps it would be an idea to erase the line under links and just leave them in a slightly different shade of colour, in order to make them more discrete. Most reading of print narratives is about looking through the words [4, p. 35], because the signs are not designed to attract attention to themselves. Printed signs normally do not have the level of iconic value that linked signs in hypertext have. Thus, instead of just looking through it, the reader must also look at the linked signs because they represent an extra level of meaning, a function in themselves. This can produce a reading pattern interchanging between immersion and confrontation with the links' iconic significance.

Conclusion. Readers move back and forth between confronting the signs (reading with a critical distance) and allowing themselves to be absorbed into that imagined world. It should be clear by now, that hyperfiction has developed into a medium that offers rich possibilities for creating interesting reading experiences. There are more variables than in print literature, because the medium offers many ways of presentation and because so few conventions exist. Thus, there are many more questions that the writer must ask himself in addition to those connected with putting the right words in the right order. The reader, likewise, must broaden his interpretive range for new ways of literary signification and learn to notice subtle meanings implied in the use of linking and other formal elements.

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У статті розглянуто актуальну проблему використання інформаційних технологій, а також можливість інтегрування їх у навчальний процес. Ця інтеграція сприяє ефективності вирішення цілого ряду дидактичних завдань під час читання художніх гіпертекстів англійською мовою. Також автор звертає увагу на доцільність та специфіку використання інформаційних технологій у роботі з художнім гіпертекстом.

Ключові слова: інформаційні технології, гіпертекст, художній текст, текстualність, технологія моделювання.

В статье проанализирована актуальная проблема использования информационных технологий, а также возможность их интегрирования в процесс обучения. Эта интеграция способствует эффективности решения целого ряда дидактических задач в процессе чтения художественных гипертекстов на английском языке. Также автор обращает внимание на специфику использования информационных технологий в работе с художественным гипертекстом.

Ключевые слова: информационные технологи, гипертекст, художественный текст, текстualность, технология моделирования.

Одержано 25.02.2015.