Architectural Fiction
Hypertext Fiction, Its Architect and Its Decorators

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When Jay David Bolter, Michael Joyce and John B. Smith developed *Storyspace* in the early 1980s, a new medium for fiction writing became available to authors. Storyspace is a hypertext writing environment that is suitable for creating large hypertext systems, including novel-sized fictional stories a reader can navigate by following links.[1] The idea of hypertext literature is much older, but with the coming of Storyspace, hypertext fiction can be realized in an easy, accessible way. The first novel created with Storyspace, written by Michael Joyce himself, was *afternoon, a story*, which was published in 1987 and was among the first serious literary hypertexts. A series of other short stories and novels using hypertext followed, among them were *Patchwork Girl* by Shelley Jackson, *Victory Garden* by Stuart Moulthrop, and *Turning In* by Wes

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1   On <www.eastgate.com/storyspace>, one can read about this program, order it, try out a demo and even order fiction written with the use of Storyspace.

Chapman, but also several hypertext poems such as "True North" by Stephanie Strickland, and "Intergrams" by Jim Rosenberg were created.

Although hypertext fiction, like these examples, never really made it into the dominant literary circuit, it does offer an interesting new approach to storytelling that challenges our perception of text, as well as of the roles the author and reader of a text have in the reading experience. The most radical difference between hypertext fiction and traditional fiction is the fact that in hypertext fiction the order of a text is no longer fixed. Hypertext requires active navigation by its readers and, unlike traditional fiction, it does not outline the path a reader is supposed to take; the reader can choose the direction he wants to take.

The instability of hypertext fiction when it comes to its order raises two important questions that have to be considered when studying and reading hypertext fiction. The first one is whether there is one true text, an original text, behind the different versions that a reader can recover from one hypertext fiction document, or if every perceived text is a single unique text in itself. The second question regards the location of meaning production within the text. Since the reader takes such an active part in creating the text for himself, it is fair to ask if the meaning of the text resides in the words that the text consists of, or whether the order in which they are presented to its reader are of fundamental importance in his understanding of the text. This question about meaning production has just as much to do with traditional literature and writing as it has with hypertext and hypertext fiction, but it has an added dimension to it when it comes to hypertext's possibility of multiple storylines stemming from one source text. Because of the possibility of multiple stories within one text, the second question is directly linked to the first, since the problem of meaning production within a text only makes sense once we have established what we define as a text.

When we read hypertext fiction, we are dealing with nonlinear fiction, or, more accurately, with multi-linear fiction. In *Victory Garden*, for example, the path chosen by its readers determines what ending the story will have. Choices made in the early stages of navigation through the hypertext structure may close down links that are meant to serve a different start, shutting the reader off from a part of the story's network. Confronted with a text that has separate storylines and

outcomes, we may wonder whether there is one true, real, text that is the one that was originally intended to be the one and true text by the author. Is there an absolute version of a text, regardless of the way it is presented to its readers?

Hypertext as intentional text

Espen Aarseth[2] points out that, in general, people tend to disrespect flawed book copies in favour of a perfect, 'real,' text that they are able to imagine on the basis of the imperfect copy (Aarseth 764). The question he asks himself after a visit to a movie that has been miss edited is whether he has seen the movie, even if it has been shown to him in the wrong order. The same would go for a book which chapters have been mistakenly misplaced: after reading the book in the wrong order, have we read the book? We automatically imagine a book with a missing page, because in the 'real text' it would not have been the author's intention to have that page missing from the book. So this text, at least the way the text is presented, cannot be regarded as a text, because it has become what it is by an unintentional altering of the presentation. This presents us with another problem, because we could encounter a text that makes perfect sense to us, but we know nothing about the author's intentions. Suppose there has been an accidental change to the order in which the text is presented, which does not affect our understanding of its content, there is no way of knowing whether we are dealing with an intentional or an unintentional text (Aarseth 765).

The reason for bringing up miss edited movies and flawed books, is that I would like to point out that in the case of the mixing up of order, there is no difference between a linear text and hypertext fiction. It may seem that in hypertext fiction the reader has a great deal of freedom while reading the text and thus will create readings the author himself would never have intended. But if we look at every text, linear or non-linear, as an intentional construction by its author, there is as much intentionality in creating a network of links and fragments as there is in deciding which information to hand the reader first and

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2   Espen Aarseth is a Principal Researcher at The IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark. More on Aarseth on his personal website: <http://www.hf.uib.no/hi/espen/>.

what sequence will be next. If a book has been unintentionally altered, the reader might notice this, because the information given by the book does not make sense to him in the order it is presented. The same goes for hypertext fiction, or for that matter, hypertext in general. When we follow a link, we have an idea of the content of the text we are linked to. If a link named Hypertext leads us to a page on investment banking, we will automatically assume that something is wrong.

Aarseth tries to solve this problem by declaring that texts (in a broader sense) are the same when they share the same "original and heretical sequences, which are based in the same material potential" (765). The separate parts, regardless of their order, are the same in both the intended version of the author as in the version that was created by mistake, so the two texts are essentially the same text.

Hypertext fiction is in a somewhat floating position between these two possibilities of textual appearance. Its separate parts are known and arranged by the author, but the sequences in which they are presented to the reader depend heavily on the reader himself. In the end, the only argument we could hold in favour of the existence of a 'true' text, is that the separate parts should be the same in every version of it. In that case, hypertext fiction functions as a textual network that, as a network, constitutes the real, true, text.

As we have seen, order is an essential part of the creation and our understanding of a text. Not only have we seen that the changing of the order can completely mess up our understanding of a text, order is also a powerful tool to the author. By choosing which information to give us first, an author steers the experience we have while reading the story. Taking the classic detective as an example, it is not that hard to imagine what would happen to the suspense and the puzzle created by the author if we were to break up the novel's order. It would not be as classic if it started with the killer's arrest.

When an author chooses to let go of the fixed order in a story, as we often find in hypertext fiction, he does not simply write a linear story with some added links. The author knows the story is going to be nonlinear before he starts writing. A work of hypertext fiction is a construction by the author that will yield up its secrets one link at a time. Knowing that the reader can choose several available paths, the author has to be careful in his construction of the fragments and the

links between them, in order to allow the reader to gradually complete the informational picture that makes up the story. The architecture of a text is important to the reader's comprehension of it in both linear and nonlinear texts.

Next to the writer's intentions, every text is also subject to its reader's interpretation. A linear text can be interpreted in different ways by readers of different sex, age, culture or race, but with a nonlinear text there is also the problem of the order of presentation that can steer the reader's understanding and interpretation of the discrete fragments, and by doing so his understanding and interpretation of the whole text. Moreover, in re-reading hypertext fiction the reader might encounter previously unread fragments, but his interpretation of these fragments will rely heavily on the knowledge the reader has gained in an earlier reading. Although we have established that the reader re-reads the same text as he read in a first reading, the story he comes across in a second reading might be very different from the first reading, as in *Victory Garden*. While when we have read a novel, we have read the whole text, the multilayered character of hypertext fiction allows us to finish a story, without having read the whole text. This again troubles our understanding of a true text, since every separate story seems to consist of one separate text, while the one and only text constructed by the author is the complete network of links. Hypertext fiction shows itself to be radically different from traditional fiction.

Exploration vs. Construction

To complicate the reading of hypertext fiction, the role of the reader within the text, and the construction of a storyline even further, some hypertexts allow its reader to actively contribute to the text by adding his own links. These are known as constructive hypertexts. Michael Joyce makes a clear distinction between exploratory hypertexts and constructive hypertexts. Exploratory hypertexts, Joyce states, allow its readers or its audience, for Joyce does not narrow his definition of hypertext to one medium, to navigate through a given body of information, and in the process compare different approaches on the topic at stake (Joyce 615). Constructive hypertexts are designed for a more active and creative reader, since the reader has a great deal of influence on the text while reading it. A distinctive feature of the constructive hypertext is that they require a visual representation of their structure:

a map is being used to locate and access desired information. Next to that, constructive hypertexts allow their readers to become their writers, offering them the opportunity to add information and create new links within the existing structure (Joyce 616), as in *Victory Garden*, which I will discuss later on.

So, in constructive hypertext, we can see the reader's role increase, giving the reader an influence in the story as far as he wants to. The text could perfectly well be left alone, but it also allows change. The reader's freedom has been increased, and so has, quite literally, the reader's role in the production of meaning. In order to determine what mechanisms of interpretation and applying meaning to a text are at work in hypertext fiction, I will have a look at the role of the reader in hypertext. Reader-response theorists have asked themselves the question whether the text or the reader himself is the source of meaning while reading the text. Although the reader-response theory concerns itself almost exclusively with traditional linear reading, I believe there are some interesting things to learn from this theory from the perspective of hypertext fiction.

According to Wolfgang Iser, a leading figure in reader-response and reception theory, the study of any literary work should not only concern the actual text, but also the actions involved in reading and thus responding to that text. He states that there are two poles to a text: the artistic pole, the author's text, and the aesthetic pole, the realization of the text in the reader's mind. The literary work only comes into being in the exchange between the two poles; it has a virtual position between text and reader (Iser 21). Though this approach to literary texts is aimed at the printed linear text familiar to us, it provides a basis for a dynamic description of the reading of hypertext fiction. If the text itself does not exist as a work of literature without a reader consuming it, only the part that is actually read will make it into this literary sphere. For hypertext fiction, this would mean that only the chosen path in a single reading is elevated to literature the moment the reader takes it into his aesthetic domain. If the text's presentation of its separate parts is indeed part of the text itself, we can say that by reading a work of hypertext fiction and following its links a reader transforms the underlying structure of the text into a work of literature in the action of exploring it.

Where the traditional novel's text will not shift or change at our will, or respond to us, hypertext fiction has an additional quality.

A work of hypertext fiction will always be a construction made by an author, just as much as the linear novel is. This also means that we have to go by the rules of its structure while reading or exploring a text. What hypertext fiction, especially the exploratory hypertext, grants us is the illusion of freedom within a strictly organized canvas. So the text itself is not adapting to its reader, this reader is creating a custom text to fit his needs. In theoretical structure, linear and non-linear texts might not in fact respond differently to their readers or their readers to them, but looking at the experience the reader has while reading, hypertext fiction does give us the sensation of a more direct interaction or communication with the text.

In the use of links in hypertext fiction, we see another paradoxical parallel to traditional fiction. The links in non-linear texts function as blanks in linear texts. They constitute meaning and interpretation, as reading a text is as much about what is in it as about what is left out. Ellipses are common style elements in fiction, just as the use of subtle implications in the story in favour of explicit accounts of every situation. As much as the blanks in the content of a story, the blanks in the presentation of a story carry meaning to a reader as well. The reader has to bridge gaps and thus has to fill in these blanks with his own interpretation. This is where communication begins. As Iser puts it: "Blanks indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so" (24). Blanks prompt the reader into interpretation, by which the reader eliminates the blanks. I believe we act on the links in hypertext fiction as though they were a line of white on a printed page, immediately trying to connect the content of the latter fragment to that of the previous. We know the conventions of the printed texts, we are familiar with the jumps they make and we automatically apply these conventions to hypertext fiction when we are confronted with it. At the same time, however, hypertext is precisely not this printed text. We therefore do apply the reading techniques we have always known, but with a constant awareness of the surprises hypertext might hand us.

The Architect of Hypertext Fiction and Its Decorator

Being surprised by a text is a matter of its non-linear character; it makes a text unpredictable and leaves a reader in the dark on what sort of fragments will follow, even on how long the text will last. In line with the

uncertainty the text presents us with, Silvio Gaggi states, that what truly sets hypertext fiction apart from linear fiction is its lack of centre. Gaggi[3] stresses this postmodern quality of hypertext fiction, demonstrating it does not have a fixed line along which the story develops and which leads the reader along, but instead consists of many different paths that are all equally important and trivial at the same time. While reading a linear text, a reader might follow an intertextual side path offered by the text, and return to the main text later on, picking up where he had left. In reading hypertext, following side paths becomes the main occupation of the reader, who will gradually lose track of his ways and wander off into completely different topics from where he started (Gaggi 102).

While reading hypertext fiction, most of the time the reader is not sure where he is going when he follows a link. Taking Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* as an example, the possible links are hidden in the text and only to be discovered by random clicking or by checking the menu on top of the page. A map added to the story is another help for getting around, but to a reader unfamiliar with its content, the map is just as confusing as the hidden links themselves. The map could however be useful once the reader is well on his way, covering the whole network of textual fragments.

Because the author does not guide us through the story, we become very aware of our own actions, but also of the links themselves and therefore of the author's construction. As Moulthrop points out, the reader is not experiencing more freedom from the authorial writer, but is in fact more aware of the author's presence than he would be while reading a conventional text (Moulthrop 687). This is probably because the links provided by hypertext fiction make us aware of the choices made by the author, whereas in linear writing the choices made for us are the only choices available, since there is only one presented text. Thus, our awareness of the choices is not nearly as strong as when we are confronted with the opportunity, but also the obligation, to choose. In *Victory Garden*, the reader has the option not to choose and just hit return when he has finished a fragment, but reading the story this way does not make the reader aware of the links, which will render

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3   Silvio Gaggi is Professor of Humanities and Chair of the Department of Humanities and American Studies at the University of Ohio, more information on <http://www.cas.usf.edu/humanities/gaggi.html>.

them useless. It is precisely the illusion of freedom within hypertext fiction that grants the reader his pleasure in exploring the text, but also hands the author the opportunity to trick its readers in ways impossible in linear fiction.

Another feature of hypertext fiction is the possibility for the reader to become the writer himself, granting him yet another experience of freedom. In many works of constructive hypertext fiction the reader is able to save previous readings, to add new links or to create a link that leads to his own comment on the text. This further complicates our notion of the 'real' text, because now every user, when he actively participates in the work's possibilities, will in the end own a slightly different version of the original text. This creative feature of hypertext fiction is essential for its dynamic character and is therefore to be included in its literary characteristics. The active reader actually becomes the second writer of his own copy and adds his aesthetic experience of the work to the hypertext with an actual contribution to it. If the contributions of the reader are indeed a part of the literary quality of hypertext fiction, it will only reach its full potential under the constructive hands of its reader.

Having said this, it is important to have a look at the role of the hypertext's author, since his role changes in perspective to traditional fiction, where the author is the sole creator of the work and the work has only one original text. Hypertext fiction has one original construction, but is never fixed in the way traditional fiction is. When it comes to hypertext fiction, the author will still hold his pedestal, since every work of hypertext fiction is a network on its own, only to be revised and rearranged by its readers. The different versions of the text that readers will create for themselves will not be seen as plagiarism, because the opportunity to change the text lies within the construction the author himself has offered his readers.

In conclusion, I would pose that hypertext fiction is essentially different from traditional fiction. Although we can read both with the same conventions and they both employ language as their medium, hypertext fiction demands a much more liberal approach than traditional fiction. Traditional fiction originates from a culture that praises the individual writer for his or her achievement and this makes it essential to conserve the original works the way the author intended them to be. Hypertexts are an engine for cultural change, however slowly this will

be realized. As soon as we have bought a house, we are free to knock down a wall in order to create a different space, as far as the house's construction allows it. Hypertext fiction is like a house. We inhabit it, we decorate, change, and rearrange it. However, when it comes to its construction, we are ultimately bound to its architects' decision on how to arrange its base elements. The author is the architect of hypertext fiction; the reader is free to decorate it.

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