

Writing Space Book Review Part II

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Book Review

Introduction

Writing Space delves into the details of hypertext and hypermedia in the writing world. In Writing Space, Bolter compares and contrasts hypermedia to the differences from each era of writing. Chapters 7 through 10 focus on interactive fiction, the theory of writing space, the effect on the self, and the culture as it compares print to fiction. Emphasis is placed on interactive fiction itself: the theory of the new writing space, the writing self, and the culture that supports interactive fiction. Each era of writing appears to have a parallel to the hypertext world of today.

Chapter 7 Interactive Fiction

The World Wide Web has been a large contributor to the world of electronic medium. This vehicle is a platform of experimentation for new creative writers. In the world of hypertext fiction, a whole new dimension exists. Font, color and sound give an added depth that could be imagine in printed books. Our literate culture however believes fiction belongs in print due to its linear form.

Robert Coover, a champion of hypertext fiction, argues that hypertext is a legitimate means of publication and also an innovative form of literary expression. This refashioning of traditional forms challenges our understanding of fiction. The reader's experience can involve two or three-dimensional textual space. Each episode may also contain multimedia such as graphics and sound. A navigational facility is built into each episode to guide the reader through options depending on conditions set forth by the writer. Navigation can vary horizontally, vertically, and also vary in nature cases such as flashbacks.

Afternoon

Afternoon is one of the earliest interactive fictions that navigates through episodes in a game like manner. The simplified visual structure of this standalone interactive fiction allows each episode to be linked according to the perseverance of the reader. Storyspace was the hypertext editing system used for *afternoon* and was created by Bolter, Joyce, and Smith (1990-1996). Each episode comes to life with a few hundred words at a clip combining the literary sophistication from printed fiction with the immediacy of an interactive adventure game. Navigational links are provided for the reader who determines the progression onto a new episode. The intent is to remind the reader of the closeness of electronic fiction to that of a computer adventure game. The dynamics of an episode are such that there is an opportunity to branch onto other episodes while within an episode. This can cause an orbital effect around a single episode by rereading and repeating in part of some episodes while branching off into others.

The story content can be of a traditional nature and then vary by providing intersections within the story. Similarities include a single path where you must read each page before being prompted to turn to the next page, similar to the

printed book. Episodes with many paths give the opportunity to go off into many directions. A traditional story can be imitated in its linear nature and then take on the multilinear, electronic space again.

The Rhetoric of the Multilinear

Afternoon's contribution to interactive fiction served as a paradigm for early hypertext fiction. Afternoon depends on rhythms and expectations of printed fiction, manipulating those expectations to achieve its effects. Hypertext is multilinear while each independent reading is a linear experience organized by episode. Another benefit of hypertext is the ability to narrate from different points of view. With the ability to capture a more realistic point of view, hypertext writers and readers no longer find the single narrative line adequate. The technology of hypertext itself permits the reader to make choices in the order of preference.

Hypertext challenges the need for chronological order and is otherwise known as hyperbaton. "Hyperbaton was the name given in particular to the departure from conventional work order in a sentence, but we can also think of the displaced order of episodes in a hypertext as hyperbaton [p. 130]." This displacement troubles new readers of interactive fiction. "The technique requires suspension: the reader must hold the displaced unit in mind while waiting for the rest of the syntax." 19th century novelists initially introduced the concept of multiple narratives during the industrial age of print by putting stories within stories. The 20th century modernist writers expanded the techniques by digression making them unusual for the reader's expectations. In the age of print, the emphasis has been on chronological narration for a natural storytelling effect. The introduction of hyperfiction is in essence the remediation of printed fiction. It violates the reading order in attempt to undermine the method of storytelling that the tradition of print appears to endorse.

Displacement and Repetition in Victory Garden

Victory Garden by Stuart Moulthrop (1991) is another important early hypertext. Beginning with a narrative and the undertone is set in a mythical town of academicians, administrators and students whose problems are associated with the war. Being surrounded by the ubiquity of conversation, radiocasts and television broadcasts, the situation offers some relief to the reader. The garden itself serves as a visual symbol for the entire work with forking paths. The map functions as a picture of the garden and is also symbolic. Linked graphics within the hypertext remind us of medieval manuscripts. The intentional hyperbaton within the linear text of an episode provides branching and displacement. Another feature that can be invoked by hypertext is repetition. This repetition can be either intentional or unintentional giving the repeated episode a different interpretation due to the means in arriving. "Hypertextual fiction often seems to attempt to take back what has been said and replace it with something better. This quality may be due to the experimental nature of the early hypertexts, but it is also a claim about the nature of electronic writing [p. 137]."

Disrupting the Linear

In hypertext, clear narrative itself becomes ornamental, and threatens the reader's gaze, making him aware of the text as a structure of verbal elements. Being left alone with a story is one reason hypertext may never replace printed text. A hypertext reader focuses between the decision point of the episode and the episode itself causing awareness to the hyperlinks.

The Tradition of Experiment

Interactive fiction has marked the 20th century as the era of modernism, futurism, surrealism and movements of a lesser influence. Interactive fiction must rely on the tradition of print yet be innovative. The electronic medium provides a new set of techniques to handle the tension between the linear flow of the narrative and the associate trains of thought.

Sterne and the Novel as Conversation

Shklovsky saw *Tristram Shandy* as an example of the way a novelist changes the order of events, aiming to create a complex plot. He brings together hypermedia techniques to digress, omit & delay. There are also stories within stories told in different ways. "Tristram seeks to establish a relationship of equality, to overcome the formal and one-sided relationship between author and reader assumed by the conventional novel." As narrator, his expectation is to have the reader construct the novel as they read. Tristram challenges both the conventions of a novel and conventions of presentation. As a topographic writer, Sterne has a playful way to invite the reader to share in the narrative. The effect of Sterne's digressions through text results in a critical demonstration of power by association challenging the linear dimension imposed by the printed book.

James Joyce as Hypertext

Joyce embodies two different concepts of fiction; both a novel and poem. He also reworked *Ulysses* as a palimpsest using all three stages. A palimpsest is a medieval manuscript in which the pages have been whitened and reused, so that one text sits on top of another. In a medieval palimpsest, one text replaces another; the reader is not supposed to see the earlier text [p. 144]." *Ulysses* was written to see both texts and it is difficult to see which writing is the overlay. Joyce's writing is referred to as topographic, which allows the reader to move freely through the text. His writing style puts an enormous burden on his reader but would be a rich source of experimentation for writers in electronic medium.

Borges and Exhaustion in Print

For Borges, literature is exhausted because it is committed to a conclusive ending, to a single storyline and conclusion [p. 147]. He suggests writing multiply to embrace possibilities rather than close them off giving endless possibilities.

Composition No. 1

Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* is non-static; there is action or at least dialogue that promises to advance our knowledge of the characters. We get the feeling we're reading pages from a torn conventional novel and at the same time we become literary detectives. Connecting the topics reminds us of the papyrology. Saporta demonstrates that there is more than one acceptable order for episodes; each producing its own literary effect with some orders better and many worse. *Composition No. 1* is an exercise in choice and an experiment in chance fiction and the final step is the exhaustion of printed literature. *Comp No 1* is an interactive fiction operating under the limitations that print imposes.

Multiple Reading and Writing

"In this late age of print, our literary culture treats hypertext fiction as Avant-Garde, depending on the wishes of the hypertext author. In refashioning printed fiction, hypertext makes claims about the nature of the storytelling and the power of the print medium to represent reality [p. 151]." The aim of hypertext authors is to refashion printed fiction to represent reality by leveraging the power of the electronic medium. These different media forms offer a new kind of reading that encourages us to read multiply. Stuart Moulthrop debates the assumption that our literate culture should read and write linearly, closing off possibilities to multiple explanations.

Hyperfictions such as *Afternoon* are not conducive to a linear printing style. Reading multiply challenges the reader by drawing attention to narrated events, interruptions and reversals of writing. This conflict between printed volumes and the text itself is a matter of framing that delimits the text or the contents. A conceptual frame exists whether it is a book, only the text, or the episode. The difference in electronic space is the computer yields to the delimiter of the episode while creating coherent lines and without closing off possibilities.

Opportunities exist for the authors of hypertext fiction to either control their content and outcome or invite the reader to collaborate. This collaboration can range from inviting the reader to alter the outcome, rewrite the ending or simply choose an alternate route of exploration.

Hypermedia: Popular and Avant-Garde

Our culture regards new media as diverse forms of communication that combine verbal, visual, and sound presentations. The visual inclusions are not only animations of letters and words but also nonalphabetic images. These visual components are intended to be symbolic and operate in a verbal sense.

Chapter 8 Critical Theory in a New Writing Space

The ongoing debate of how this new form of writing relates to various critical theories dates back to the 1960's and 1970's. Electronic writing technologies are so flexible that they support a variety of forms of representation, and can be understood according to a variety of critical theories. The forms and genres of electronic writing are underdetermined. Electronic writing technology can be aligned with almost any theoretical position, including the most traditional. Theorists such as Derrida and Barthes can help us understand how electronic writing redefines text and the act of reading itself [p. 162].

Writing Technologies and the Literary Critical Tradition

Good literature possesses qualities of stability, significance, and authority. Authors are recognized and praised for their abilities to represent nature realistically. Text has been regarded as an emotional expression with traditional literary values. These values have always been associated with the contemporary technology of handwriting or printing. The printing press preserved text with greater accuracy for both those Renaissance texts to be restored and also texts of contemporary authors. The amount of published authors is limited due to the cost of having a book published. The printed copy also has more authority because of its visual ease, reliability, and reproducibility.

End of Authority

New electronic technologies in communication have undermined traditional views of literature and authorship with most theorists rejecting the distinction between elite literature and popular texts. Society has also welcomed the World Wide Web as a new space of communication and also sanctions the unauthoritative nature of Web sites. The Web has become not only a vehicle to promote sexual content but also a medium for activist groups or individuals promoting their own views on topics and issues.

“Culture wars” a topic of debate in the 1980's among conservative social groups still remains associated with the technology of printed publication and the literary canon [p. 165]. The focus of the debate is over the purpose and nature of reading. As Bennett mentions, the purpose of reading is to be in the company of great souls, which was borrowed from the theory and practice of the romantics, who ultimately fashioned a religion of art to supplement or replace the truths of revealed religion.

Hypertext and Poststructuralism

Traditional views of the author and the expression of literature do not seem to correspond to the experience of reading hyperfiction. These traditions are considered a negative for electronic texts because authors use the computer, which negates the quality of literature that tradition regards most highly. Hypertext is most applicable to poststructuralist theory from the 1960's through 1980's in that it refers to the writers of this period, whose primary concern was with the making or unmaking of meaning in literary and other discourse. P170. Electronic

communication constitutes a new mode of symbolic exchange by applying the methods of poststructuralism.

“Poststructuralism clarifies the cultural significance of hypertext; the reverse is also true.”

Reader Response and the Architecture of Hypertext

Reader-response criticism is a technique used in understanding the effect text has on a reader. The reader participates in a game of the imagination with the words being the rules to which the game is played. All text leaves gaps for the reader to complete based on her own perspective. This theory also applies to hyperfiction. “The objectivity of the text is an illusion, and moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing [p. 173].”

Electronic Signs

The uses of signs and symbols to communicate have developed over the 20th century. Electronic writing seems to illustrate semiotic views of language and communication. “Both the written page and the printed page are fields in which codes can intersect, but the computer as hypertext claims to offer a more appropriate space for these intersections [p. 177].” The text of the computer or Web site is a dynamic network of relationships with the sum of all connections being all possible interpretations of the text.

Intertextual relationships occur everywhere in print-in novels, gothic romances, popular magazines, encyclopedias, grammars, and dictionaries. Electronic space seems to refashion print technology and allow the reader to visualize and realize intertextuality. Hyperfiction authors are rewriting structures to stress connections rather than textual independence. Electronic writing and graphic representations encourage the use of intertextual relationships by evaluating the mappings and growing accuracy and completeness. Mapping is a collective process.

Deconstruction and Electronic Writing

“In the age of print, marginal notes became truly marginal, part of the hierarchy of the text that the author himself defined and controlled: eventually they became footnotes and endnotes. A text in electronic space seems to have no necessary margins, no fixed boundaries [p. 181].” The electronic writing space can support a network in which all elements have equal status. In electronic fictions, the reader too may be allowed to change the structure of the text, to extend its borders in ways the author has not anticipated.

Deconstruction assumes a fixed character of a text in its effort to undermine that text. The fixed text provides a fixed target; you could not say it contradicted itself. An electronic text however claims to be only a potential text, and as such even its ambiguities are only potential. Since the text changes with each reading;

New Convergences and Popular Forms

The development of electronic communication actually began in the 1990's. Digital technology has expanded its field of remediation from purely verbal text to audiovisual media. The field of cultural studies has been concerned as much with visual as with verbal communication. The rise of multimedia authoring as well as viewing, especially on the World Wide Web, has resulted in a huge body of new popular material to be explored. Multimedia and Web are becoming truly popular cultural practices.

Looking at and Looking through

Electronic technologies can help breakdown the boundaries between literature and the other arts. "The computer could textualize all the arts: that is, it could incorporate sound and images into hypertext as easily as words [p. 184]. In the age of print, the ideal was in general to make a text transparent, so that the reader looked through the text to the word beyond." The reader can be made to focus on visual patterns, on the text as a texture of elements. Electronic writing seems to take the modern literary experience one step further. An electronic hypertext can make the structure visible, as its formal structure is embodied in the links between episodes. This decade of hypertext and hypermedia has come too implicitly to regard the oscillation between looking at and looking through, between transparency and hypermedia, as a defining characteristic of this new writing space.

The Practice of Theory

The practitioners of hyperfiction have been suggesting that this strategy may no longer be necessary. Their creative uses of hypertext have shown that theory can grow out of practice and return to practice: that is, hypertext writers—perhaps to an even greater extent than modernist print writers—can elucidate a theory through their writing. They guide us in the practice of reading these new media forms.

Chapter 9 Writing the Self

Writing has always had a reflexive quality, allowing writers to see themselves in what they write. Each writing technology has a different relationship between the written word and the identity of the writer. The mind can be understood as a writing surface and thinking as the activity of inscribing on that surface. Writing technologies do not determine how we think. The 20th century brought audiovisual media in addition to print and now we have evolved into audiovisual digital media. Electronic writing is now being regarded as a more authentic or appropriate space for the inscription of the self than print. Furthermore, electronic writing has been applied to two different views: the mind and the self.

Writing as Analysis

Long before hypertext, artificial intelligence specialists were in fact supporting a hypertextual view of the mind. Specialists proposed the mind was a network of signs. “Semiotics was suggesting that we regard the mind as a writing space filled with interwoven signs [p.191]. Ong also made the argument that writing was both a representation and a powerful extension of the natural process of thought. The characteristics brought forth by Ong were that the literate mind was analytical and the oral mind was aggregative.” “Writing in general becomes a technology for dividing the world into categories [p. 193]. Also presented is, without schooling written texts could not permeate culture, and without writing, institutions that accumulated around literacy could not exist in their current form.”

Writing the Cartesian Mind

“Memory and reason become a special and indeed privileged form of writing. The memory becomes a writing space, and the writer a homunculus who looks out at the world through our eyes and records what he sees. The homunculus translates perceptions into words and images and records them; he also puts down his inner thoughts and conclusions. To think is to write in the language of thought and to remember is to search the space of our memory until we find what is written there [p. 194].” The association of the mind with relation to writing space goes back to at least the 17th century. Ong [p.195] shared the opinion that writing unifies the mind and allows the writer to define his mind out of confusion of thoughts and emotions that are experienced.

Hypertext and the Cartesian Ego

The Cartesian view of the mind and of writing persisted in the late age of print, among those like Ong [p.196] who emphasized the power of writing for rational analysis and the unified ego. It persists among those computer specialists who define intelligence as symbol manipulation, whether by machine or human agent. Poststructuralists denied that Cartesian argument on precisely the grounds that the author has no special status in interpreting his own ideas, which are, after all, texts like any other. Poststructuralists question the philosophy of the Cartesian ego.

Electronic Writing and the Postmodern Self

Hypertextual writing can be used to challenge the notion of thought as a transparent network of signs and the Cartesian ego as the author of that network. There is ongoing debate about the relationship between the postmodern construction of the self and new media technologies. Digital media allows the reader to write or to talk back and establish the reflexive relationship of earlier writing technologies. Discoveries have been made that synchronous and asynchronous applications are ideal for the ongoing redefinition of the self. MOO's are one example that experiment with the user's identity and a new set of cultural uses.

The Materiality of the Electronic Self

In the late age of print, writing remains a material practice. Our culture still seems inclined to the materiality of writing because of the increased use of electronic networked communication. It is hard to imagine how the Cartesian paradigm could survive networked communication given developments such as MOO's where multiple identities exist and given that an electronic writer is seldom alone with her thoughts.

Chapter 10 Writing Culture

The Network Culture

The horizontal structure of networking is displacing hierarchy. The new technology of writing coupled with an increased use of hypertextual network affiliations has changed cultural interaction. Our culture now prefers to deploy electronic technologies in other ways. The simplification and increased availability of interactive technologies has now left our culture wanting to talk back to each other.

Cultural Unity

“One consequence of a networking culture is in fact the abandonment of the ideal of high culture (literature, music, the fine art) as a unifying force [p. 206].” The freedom to explore and choose as many networks as desired leaves our culture with less highly educated readers on a given subject. Knowledge is now spread across many topics or networks leaving the reader knowing only few areas well. On the World Wide Web, the distinction between high culture and popular culture has vanished since access to both cultures is networked horizontally.

The Remediation of Culture

Electronic forms of communication provide an opportunity to redefine cultural standards from printed genres and forms. For the network culture, these new means of communication are popular and are being interpreted as a radical force to disrupt the traditions of print. The ability for electronic writing to be published without authorities has contributed to this radical interpretation and has also lead to issues such as censoring and the protection of intellectual property. While the current world of print ensures the idea of fixed words and images including copyrights, it should be recognized that the printed book is no longer the only or more important space to locate our texts and images. There is a balance that exists between printed media and electronic media that is yet to be developed.