Contemporary Literature

Essay · 5 min read

On how literature changes form with hypertext and the future of the internet

What's going on here, man, what's all this fuss?

With the 20th century, a new current of thought begins, built on breaking the moulds that modernism brought in: postmodernism. The argument goes that there is no unshakeable reality, and that reality is something each person can adapt all over again. "There are people, and every person reads reality their own way," they say. And along with that, literature starts moving away from stories with a linear flow, and new currents show up that break narrative moulds and have no clear borders of style, form or genre. Different kinds that everyone can experience again and again, their own way... What are they?

- **Non-linear** stories (you can't tell which event is the cause and which is the effect)
- **Metafiction** (Normally you're not supposed to feel that you're reading what you're reading. You know how people say "man, it played out right in my head"? Yeah, this doesn't do that. The fiction always makes you feel that the fiction itself is there.)
- **Intertextuality** (the work refers to another work outside itself)
- **The unreliable narrator** (Mwehehe, I wrote it this way, but that's not what really happened, gotcha. *Ford Madox Ford's* The Good Soldier)
- **Fragmented, sectioned narrative**
- **Breaking the fourth wall** (the fiction talks about real events, or speaks straight to the reader)

Against modernism's oneness and wholeness, this postmodern thinking always argues for being in pieces, being personal, and being in conflict.

And with all that... "Ow lawd, here it comes!" **DIGITAL STORYTELLING**

When non-linear storytelling meets the power of technology, out come “hyperlinks,” or “external commands.” Thanks to these links you can split your story into pieces and assign those pieces to links. By clicking those links you can experience the story in different ways.

This actually blurs the line between reader and writer a bit. In linear stories, the writer has set a path for how the story is to be consumed, and “forces” you to consume it along that flow. But that doesn’t apply to hypertext, because the reader can interact with the story.

Hypertext was first put forward by Ted Nelson in 1960, along with Project Xanadu, which proposed a global, interlinked computing network. Sounds a lot like the World Wide Web, right? Yep, and the Xanadu people say exactly that: the WWW stole it from them. There’s a fight going on a bit like Tesla versus Edison. But let’s get back to our topic.

Hypertext aims to build a narrative tied together with hyperlinks, and to do that it leans on these four things:

- **Non-linear flow:** the reader (or at this point, the user) can experience the story however they like.
- **Interactive structure:** the user interacts with the story directly by clicking the hyperlinks.
- **Fragmentation:** the fiction is built from small, linked sections, and the user can put them together however they like.
- **Multiplicity:** hypertexts are texts with more than one ending or conclusion depending on the user’s choices, open to being experienced in different ways.

NON-LINEAR FLOW

What we call non-linear flow is really the name for a way of telling a story with no direct flow, where you can’t quite grasp what is the cause and what is the effect. To build it, you can usually use branching narratives, repeating narratives that follow one another, or sections that don’t come in order. That way you get to see different points of view on the same event, or events running parallel to it. So with every reading (or every use) you can learn something new about the story.

So, Hypertext or Interactive Fiction?

They say these two are actually different fields, but they have a lot in common. Like lemons and limes.

How they're alike

- Both put the user's experience first and let the user be part of the story.
- Both aim to build an interactive structure out of choices.
- Both want the story to take shape in different ways, so it can mean something different even when you read it again.

How they're different

- Hypertext basically gives you options that open different links. Interactive fiction uses a text parser (an interface that simplifies what the player types so the system can understand it).
- Interactive fiction tries to do more game-y things. It uses the mechanics of gathering the information you need to solve a problem, putting it in the right places, making deductions and moving on (game mechanics, in short). Hypertext, though, is really the postmodern version of reading a book.
- So interactive fiction aims for a more immersive and interactive experience. You're actively working at it and reacting to things.

The first examples of hypertext go back to 1987. The first one is *Afternoon, a story*, written by Michael Joyce and sold on the floppy disks of its day, which matters because it showed that stories could flow, and be read, non-linearly.

Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1991) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) are among the early examples of hypertext too.

And here are the ones people say you have to look at:

- Geoff Ryman's *253* (1996): the linked stories of 253 characters travelling under London.

- Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls* (2001): a hypertext about identity, adolescence and sexuality.
- *The Unknown* (1998 to 2001), by Scott Rettberg, William Gillespie and Dirk Stratton: a work written by three different writers in three different ways, built to tear traditional ways of storytelling to the ground.

METAFICTIONAL ELEMENTS

Hypertexts and interactive fiction often work at turning a work's storytelling into the story itself. That makes the ties between reader, writer and the text itself very blurry. By breaking the fourth wall they meet the reader's (consumer's, user's) expectations in ways the reader doesn't expect, and because this breaks classic narrative techniques, it can make the reader uncomfortable.

Going into meta-narratives also leads to the writer's authority being questioned, because it breaks the line between reality and fiction. (See: the unreliable narrator.) In hypertext and IF works, the reader is the writer's counterpart and helps the writer build the story.

CYBERTEXT, OR ERGODIC LITERATURE

A literary scholar called Espen Aarseth puts forward the name cybertext, together with hypertext or as an alternative to it. He also explains that cybertext is not a type or a "genre," and that all hypertext-like literary works should be gathered under the roof of Ergodic Literature. Fine, but what on earth is Ergodic Literature? Here's how Aarseth explains it:

> "In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages."

In other words, in traditional narrative forms nothing is required beyond your eye following the line, and the text doesn't push the reader.

The rise of ergodic literature runs parallel to the growth of electronic literature. The new medium, and what it brought into use, can fully carry the hectic nature of postmodern thought. So writers who want to develop new ways of telling and break away from traditional forms find themselves right at the heart of electronic literature. As technology grows, needs and ideas change. And that change shows up not only in what texts say, but in how texts are presented.

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Translated from my Turkish original for this site. Espen Aarseth is quoted in his own words, from Cybertext (1997).