Telling Tales

Hypertext Writing

Dr Nicholas Gibbins - nmg@ecs.soton.ac.uk
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By ‘hypertext’, I mean non-sequential writing - text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways.

The Death of the Author

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.

Hypertext and the Death of the Author

“It is tempting to see hypertext as realizing Barthes' utopian dreams of a writing liberated from the Author. The ability for each reader to add to, alter, or simply edit a hypertext opens possibilities of collective authorship that breaks down the idea of writing as originating from a single fixed source.

Similarly, the ability to plot out unique patterns of reading, to move through a text in an aleatory, non-linear fashion, serves to highlight the importance of the reader in the “writing” of a text - each reading, even if it does not physically change the words - writes the text anew simply by re-arranging it, by placing different emphases that might subtly inflect its meanings.”

Forking Paths

“In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts’ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. Here, then, is the explanation of the novel’s contradictions.

Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both can die, and so forth. In the work of Ts’ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings.”

Ergodic Literature

http://www.flickr.com/photos/danielygo/5391176827/
Ergodic Literature

“Ergodic [...] derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning "work" and "path." 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.”

Composition No. 1, Roman (1962)

150 loose leaf pages

- Pages are to be shuffled before reading

Hopscotch (1963)

Structured as 155 chapters

- Chapters 57-155 designated as ‘expendable’

Two readings of the book:

- Chapters 1-56 in order
- All chapters, following the reading order given in the instructions: 73-1-2-116-3-

Un conte à votre façon (1967)

Numbered double-page spreads
- Story on verso pages
- Explicit choices on recto pages

The Unfortunates (1969)

27 chapters, bound as pamphlets
- Designated first chapter
- 25 chapters, to be read in any order
- Designated last chapter

Story, Narrative and Text
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Narrative theory identifies three levels in fiction:

- Story: the content of a tale; the underlying events related in a tale (also referred to as \textit{fabula})
- Narrative: a recounting of a story; the reorganisation of events by time or point-of-view (also referred to as \textit{plot})
- Text: the signs (words, images) that are processed by the reader

Non-linearity may be introduced at any or all of these levels

Story versus Narrative: Citizen Kane
Story versus Narrative: Citizen Kane
Narrative versus Text: Psycho

Psycho (1960)

Psycho (1998)
Hypertext Fiction

A selection:

- Michael Joyce (1987) - *afternoon, a story*
- Stuart Moulthrop (1992) - *Victory Garden*
- Geoff Ryman (1996) - *253*
afternoon, a story (1987)

"I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning."

Non-linear narrative with default path

• Notecard-like lexias

• No explicit anchors; all words are anchors

• Built as demonstration of the hypertext authoring system Storyspace

Victory Garden (1992)

Follows a central character (Emily) and the interactions of those connected with her, set during Gulf War I.

Multiple non-linear *narratives* with default paths

- Anchors indicate branches to other narratives (initially hidden, but can be made explicit)
- Provides a taxonomic overview map

Descriptions of the 253 occupants (passengers plus driver) of a London Underground train

Extensive cross-referencing and footnotes support a non-linear narrative

- Each description is 253 words long
- Originally published on the Web

Hypertext Fiction

Academic study concentrates on literary hypertext (c.f. literary fiction)

- Typified by non-linear *narratives*, rather than non-linear *stories*

What about the hypertext equivalent of genre or popular fiction?
Lucky Les (1967)

Third person narrative

Coarse-grained, non-linear story

- Multi-page lexias corresponding to episodes in Les’ life

- Each episode concludes with an explicit choice for the reader

Choose Your Own Adventure (1979-)

Second person narrative

Again, non-linear story

- Single page lexias
- Numbered pages with explicit choices

See also interactive fiction (Colossal Cave/Advent, etc)


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The cable attaching you to the Maray is extended to its limit. You have come to rest on a ledge near the canyon in the ocean floor that ancient myth says leads to the lost city of Atlantis.

You have an experimental diving suit designed to protect you from the intense pressure of the deep. You should be able to leave the Seeker and explore the sea bottom. The new suit contains a number of the latest microprocessors enabling a variety of useful functions. It even has a built-in PDA with laser communicator. You can cut loose from the cable; the Seeker is self-propelled. You are now in another world. Remember, this is a dangerous world, an unknown world.

As agreed, you signal the Maray, “All systems GO. It’s awesome down here.”

If you decide to explore the ledge where the Seeker has come to rest, turn to page 6.

If you decide to cut loose from the Maray and dive with the Seeker into the canyon in the ocean floor, turn to page 4.
Life’s Lottery (1999)

Increasing sophistication – not a children’s book!

- Lexias vary in size from a paragraph of a few sentences to several pages
- Non-linear story, but with an additional narrative if lexias are read in order, rather than by following the directions in the lexias

Ludic Hypertext

http://www.flickr.com/photos/jamesrbowe/4001776922/
Ludic Narrative

Game + Story ... but what’s in a game?

Different forms of play

- Competition (*agon*)
- Chance (*alea*)
- Simulation (*mimicry*)
- Disorientation (*ilinx*)

Different types of play

- Structured, explicit rules (*ludus*)
- Unstructured, spontaneous (*paidia*)

Fighting Fantasy (1982-)

Combines CYOA-style second person narrative with Dungeons & Dragons-style rules

- Non-linear story
- Numbered paragraphs (more finely-grained narrative)
- Mixture of explicit and random choices (aleatory reading)
- External state (hit points, inventory, etc)

Duel Master (1986-7)

Two-player gamebook (agon)

- Non-linear story
- Split across two paired books (even/odd numbered lexia)
- Shared state (keywords) and synchronisation
- Mixture of explicit and random choices (aleatory reading)

Second person narrative

- Again, non-linear *story*
- Simple rules
- No aleatory aspects

Mimicry aimed at a different demographic to that of other gamebooks!

Dark Cults (1983)

Storytelling card game

- *Story* assembled from random selection of text fragments (*alea*)
- Aim is to improvise a *narrative* around the story

Rules ensure well-formed stories

- Card types limit which cards may be played next

Integral competition (*agon*)

- Play alternates between players (Life and Death)
- Scores assigned to different card types for each player

Dark Cults (1983)
Sculptural Hypertext: Card Shark

• A Card Shark node (or card) contains some text, typically a brief, focused passage

• Each card may also specify constraints on the context in which it may appear

• Reader receives seven random cards, based on constraints chooses which card to visit next, repeats

• Social Shark: collaborative, competitive reading
  – Readers take it in turns to play cards
  – Points awarded to readers for the playing of particular cards

Hypertext Comics

http://www.flickr.com/photos/dolmansaxlil/5606944557/
Hypercomics (1986-)

Early hypertext comics based on gamebooks

- Dice Man 1-5 (1986)
- You are Maggie Thatcher (1987)

Typically second person narrative

- Numbered frames/pages
- Explicit choices in captions
- Ludic elements

Implicit choices in alternate frames

- Relies on left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading conventions
- Spatial juxtaposition of frames on the printed page permits multiple reading paths

Examined by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993)

Meanwhile (2010)

Jimmy Corrigan (2001)

Hypertext Poetry

http://www.flickr.com/photos/rossap/4160004956/
Hypertext Poetry

foundering jar
mirage glyph flash salvage

dressage foil private
enforce plinth palimpsest

musically opaque
travail finger tremor vane

Hypertext Drama

http://www.flickr.com/photos/slimjim/2169745303/
Drama vs. Hyperdrama

Traditional drama:
- presents the playwright’s (and director’s) preferred account (narrative) of a story
- distinguishes between on-stage and off-stage

Hyperdrama:
- allows the audience to follow different narratives (and to choose when to switch narratives)
- continues action off-stage

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (1967)

Additional narrative centred on minor characters in Hamlet

• Non-ergodic, therefore not hyperdrama

Night of January 16th (1935)

Courtroom drama by Ayn Rand, centred on a murder trial

- Members of the audience are selected to form a jury
- The jury’s verdict determines the ending of the play (ergodic)

Kinoautomat (1967)

Czech experimental interactive film

• First shown at Expo 67 in Montreal

• Film is stopped at intervals and audience is asked how they think the film should be continued

• Audience votes on two options (red/green) with the majority determining the future path of the film (ergodic)

Tamara (1981)

Play takes place in a large house

- Actors perform simultaneously in up to nine different rooms
- Spectators must choose which actor(s) they follow (ergodic)
- Multiple narratives

Timecode (2000)

Film composed of four overlapping narratives

• Filmed simultaneously as four continuous 90-minute takes
• Screen divided into quarters, all four films projected at same time
• Audience ‘choose’ which sub-film to watch (ergodic)

Summary
Summary

Non-linearity is the essence of hypertext

- Hypertext fiction may be non-linear in story, narrative or text
- Non-linearity may equally apply to poetry, comics, film and drama

Hypertext is also ergodic

- Non-trivial effort typically manifests itself as choice
- May also involve ludic elements