

UNIVERSITY OF  
Southampton

# Telling Tales: Hypertext Writing

COMP3220 Web Infrastructure

Dr Nicholas Gibbins - [nmg@ecs.soton.ac.uk](mailto:nmg@ecs.soton.ac.uk)

## A Working Definition

*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
- CONTENT WARNING!



# Hopscotch (Rayuela) (1963)

Structured as 155 chapters

- Chapters 57-155 designated as 'expendable'

Two readings of the book:

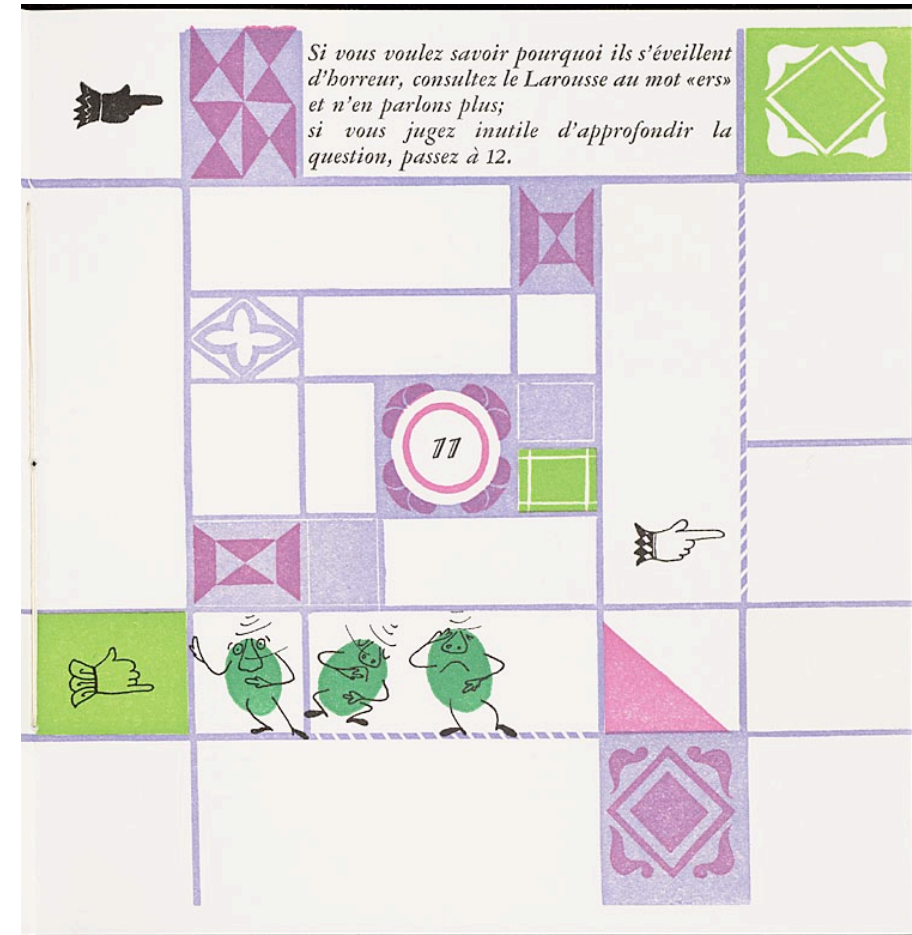
- Chapters 1-56 in order
- All chapters, following the reading order given in the instructions: 73-1-2-116-3-...



# 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

# Story, Narrative and Text

Narrative theory identifies three levels in fiction:

- Story: the content of a tale; the underlying events related in a tale (also referred to as *fabula*)
- Narrative: a recounting of a story; the reorganisation of events by time or point-of-view (also referred to as *syuzhet* or *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





# Story versus Narrative: Citizen Kane



# Story versus Narrative: Citizen Kane

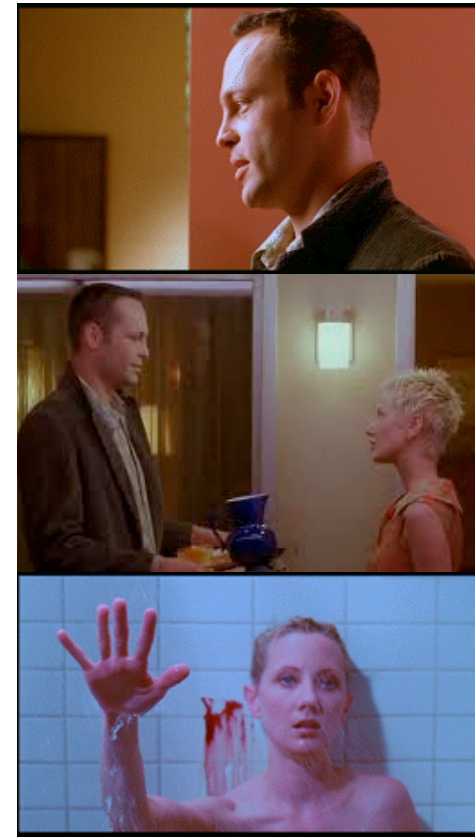


# Narrative versus Text: Psycho

Psycho (1960)



Psycho (1998)





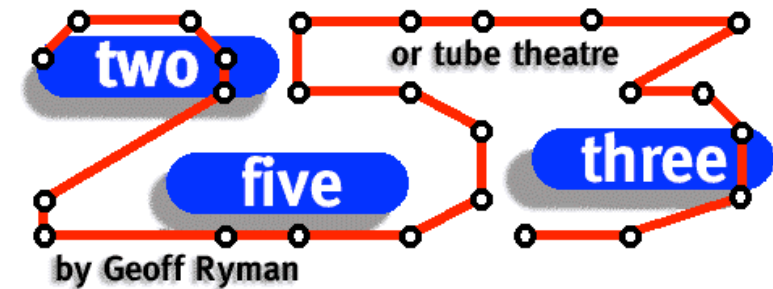
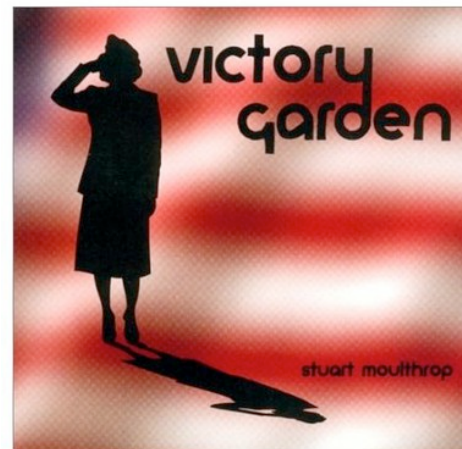
# Hypertext Fiction

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nealy-j/4579505879/>

# 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

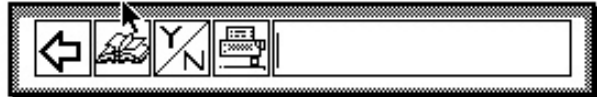
- Notecard-like lexias
- No explicit anchors; all words are anchors
- Built as demonstration of the hypertext authoring system Storyspace

false beginning

I try to recall yesterday. < As if it were winter? > I say, but she does not signify one way or another.

By five the sun rises and the night freeze melts again across the blacktop into crystal rivers -- octopi beset by fear, and we walk out to the car, the snow exploding beneath our boots and the oaks moaning in series, echoing off far ice. This was poetry, she says, without emotion, one way or another.

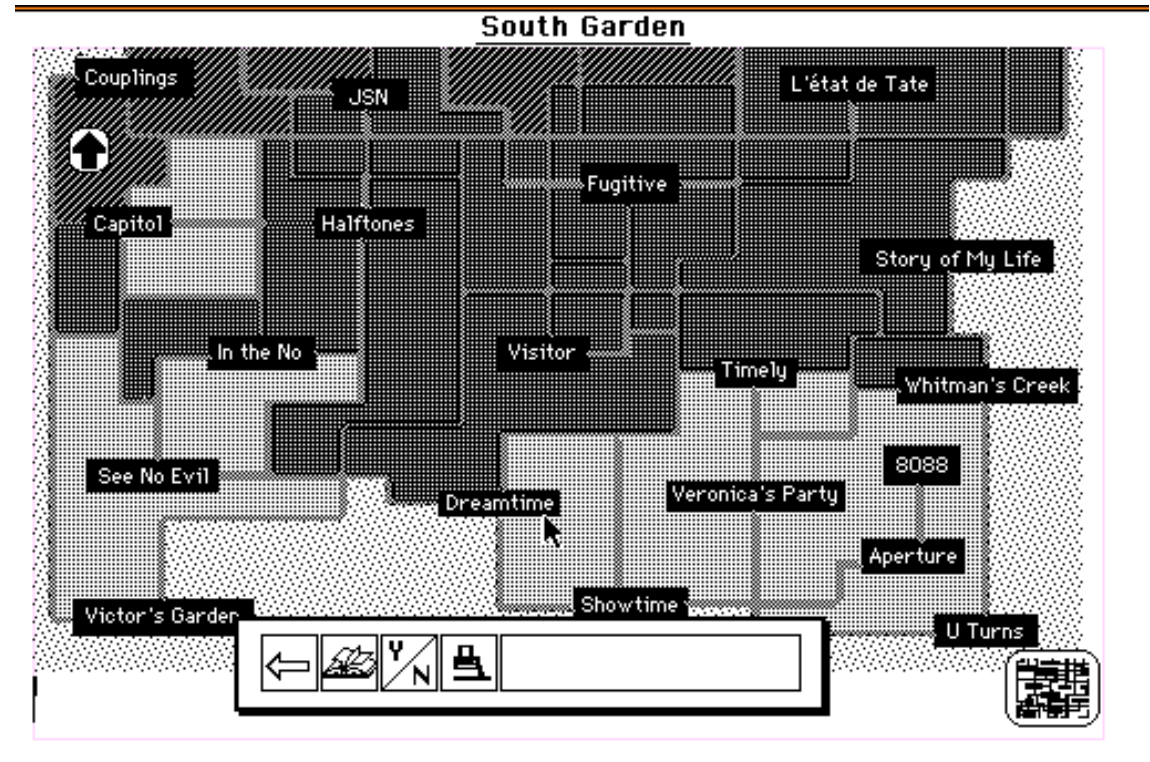
Do you hear it?



# 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



# 253 (1996)

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





Next Lecture: Telling Tales, Part 2