

UNIVERSITY OF
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Telling Tales: Hypertext Writing

COMP3220 Web Infrastructure

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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:

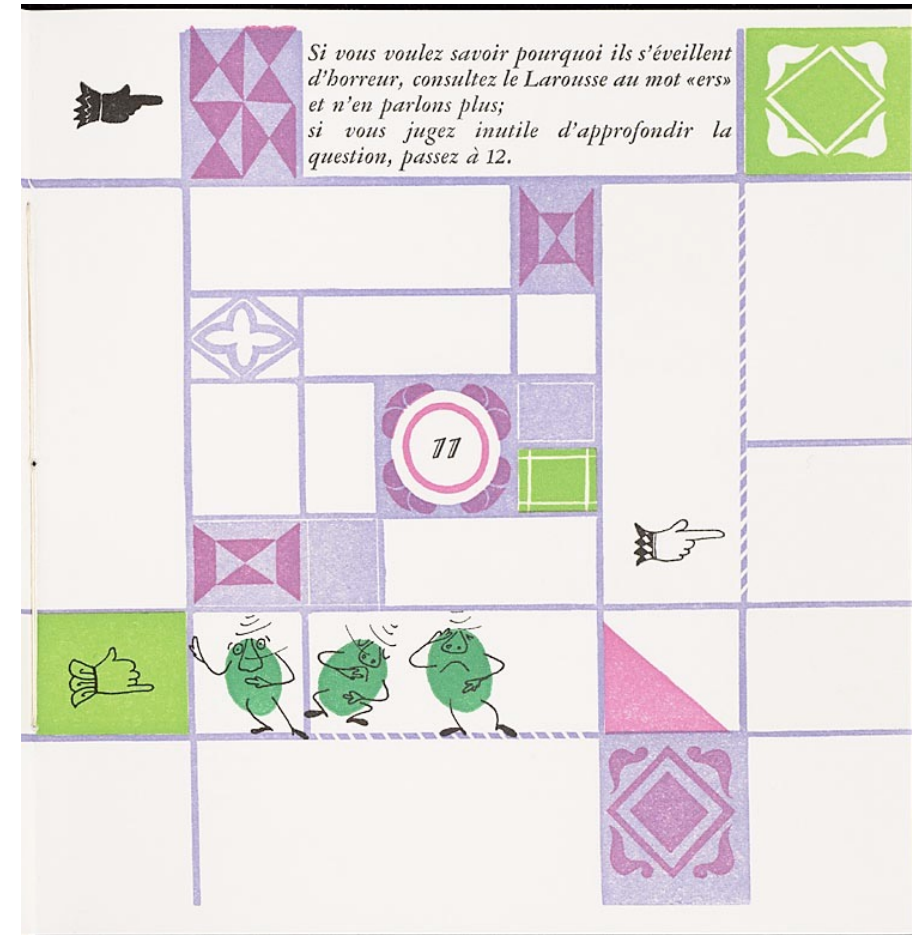
- Chapters 1-56 in order
- All chapters, following the reading order given in the instructions: 73-1-2-116-3-...



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



Cain's Jawbone (1934)

100 loose leaf pages

- Only one correct reading order!
- Book is presented as a puzzle: identify the murderer and victims, and determine the correct reading order





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 *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

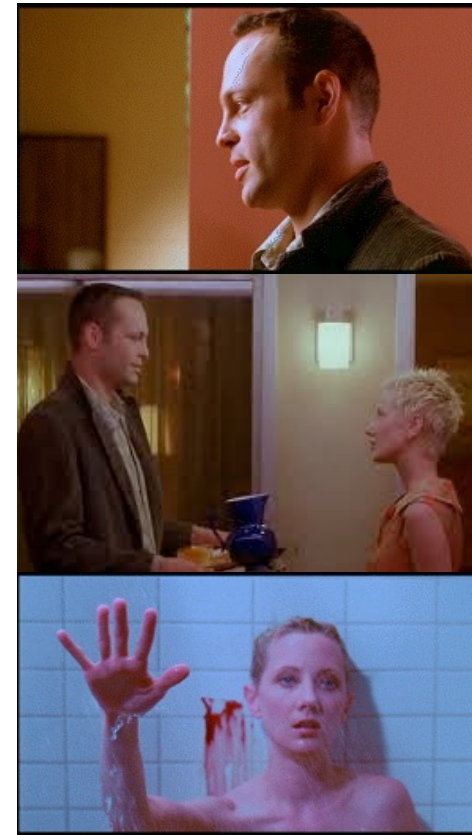


Narrative versus Text: Psycho

Psycho (1960)



Psycho (1998)



Hypertext Fiction

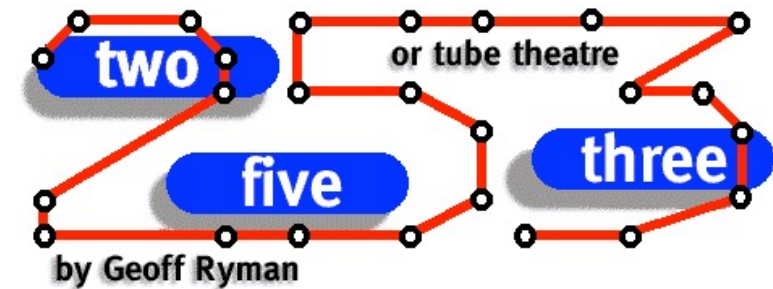
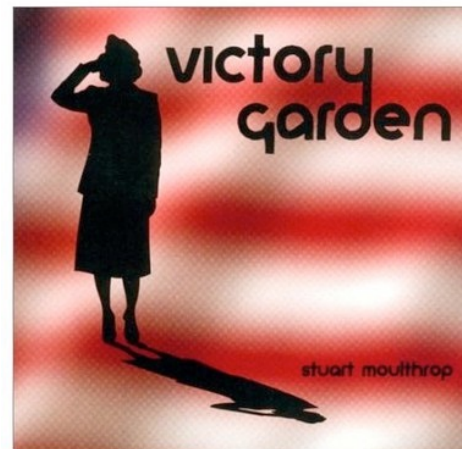
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nealy-j/4579505879/>



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

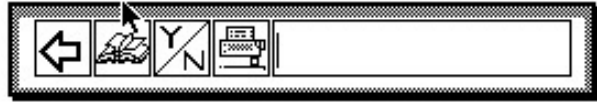
- Notecard-like lexias
- No explicit anchors; all words are anchors
- Built as demonstration of the hypertext authoring system Storyspace

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.

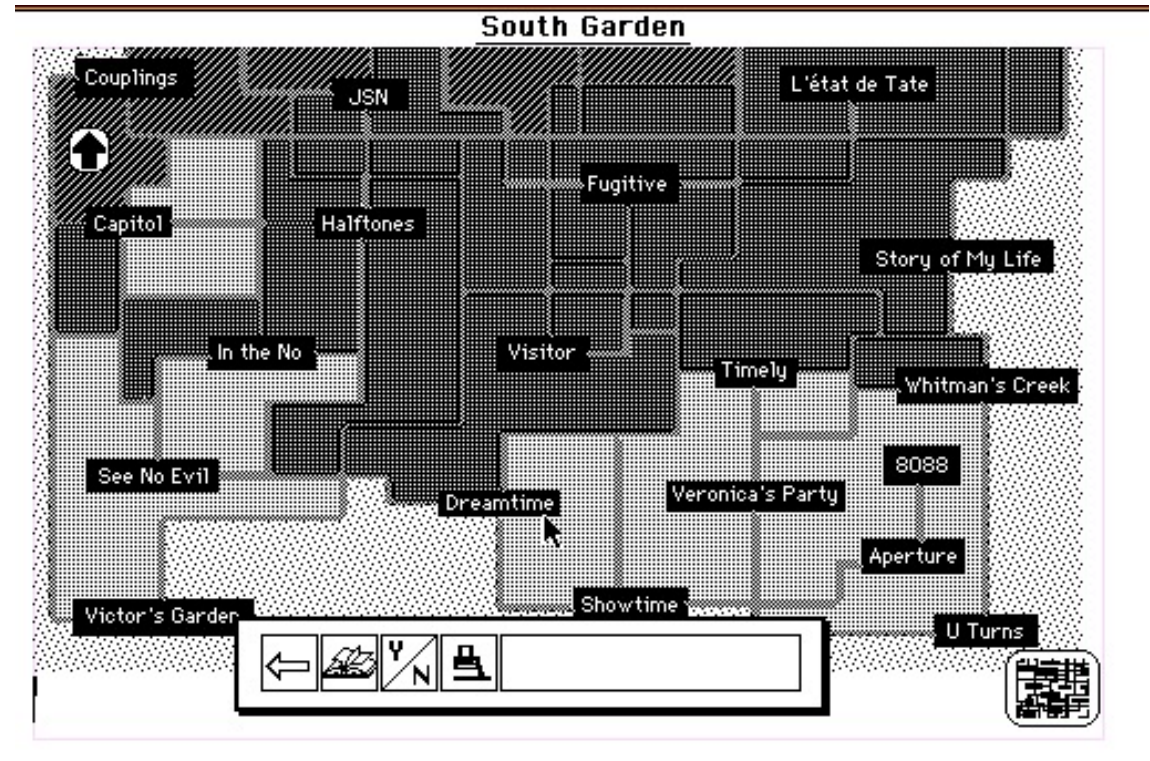
Do you hear it?



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



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?

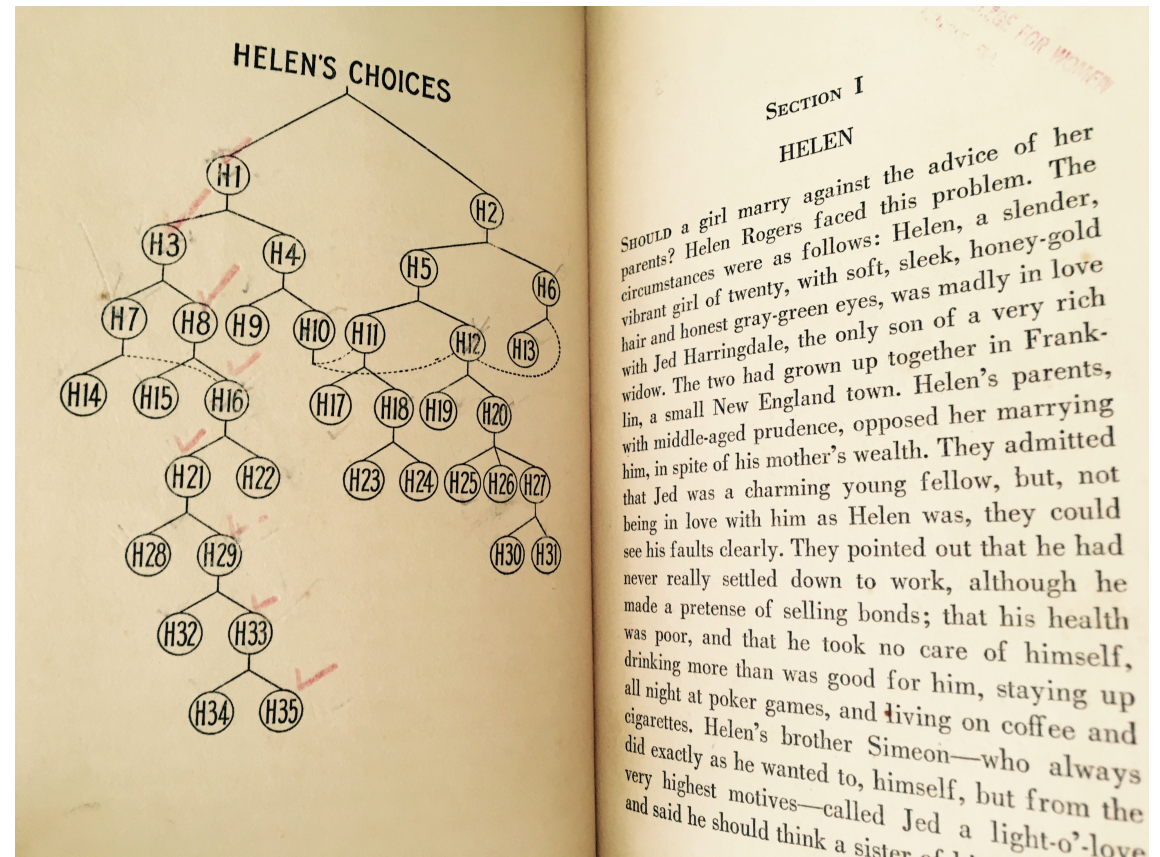
Consider the Consequences (1930)

Earliest known example of a branching novel!

Third person narrative

Relatively fine-grained, non-linear story

- Multi-paragraph lexias
- Three intertwined stories within the book (a woman and her two suitors)
- Introductory text suggests that the "game" may be played by a group

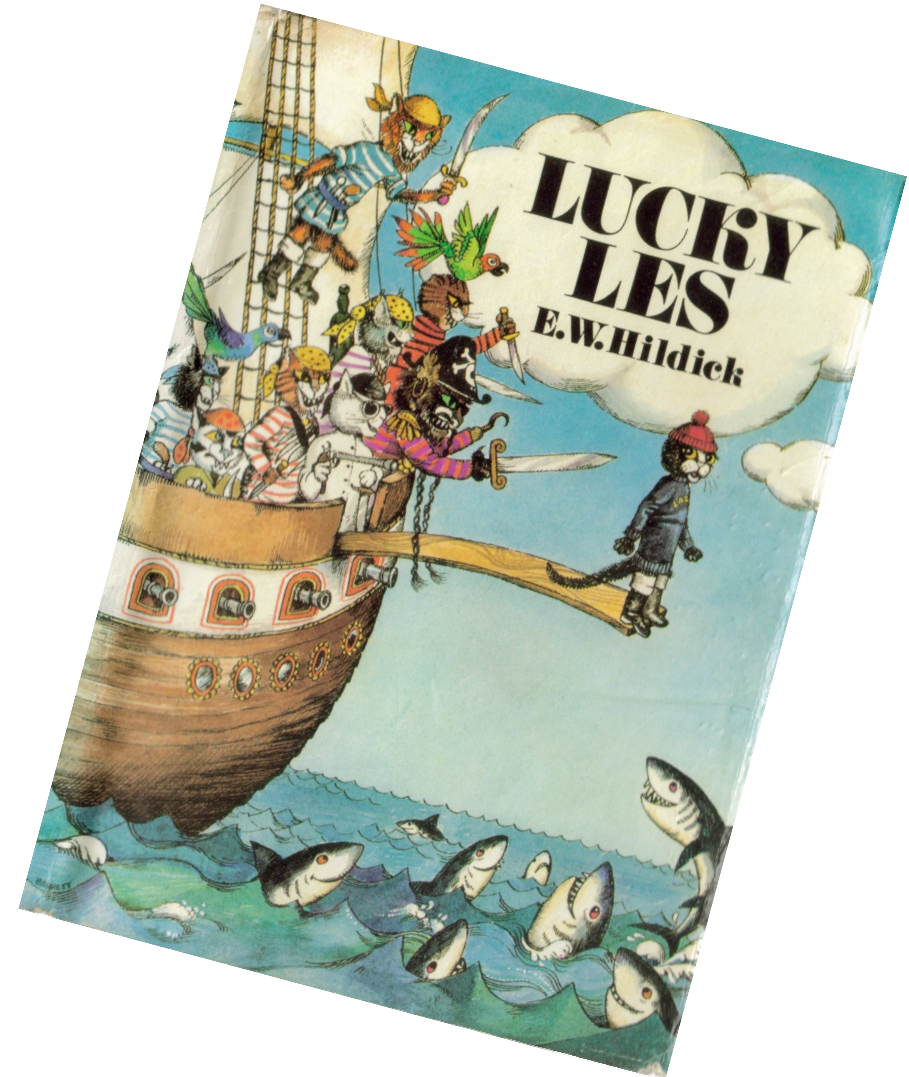


Lucky Les (1967)

Third person narrative

Coarse-grained, non-linear story

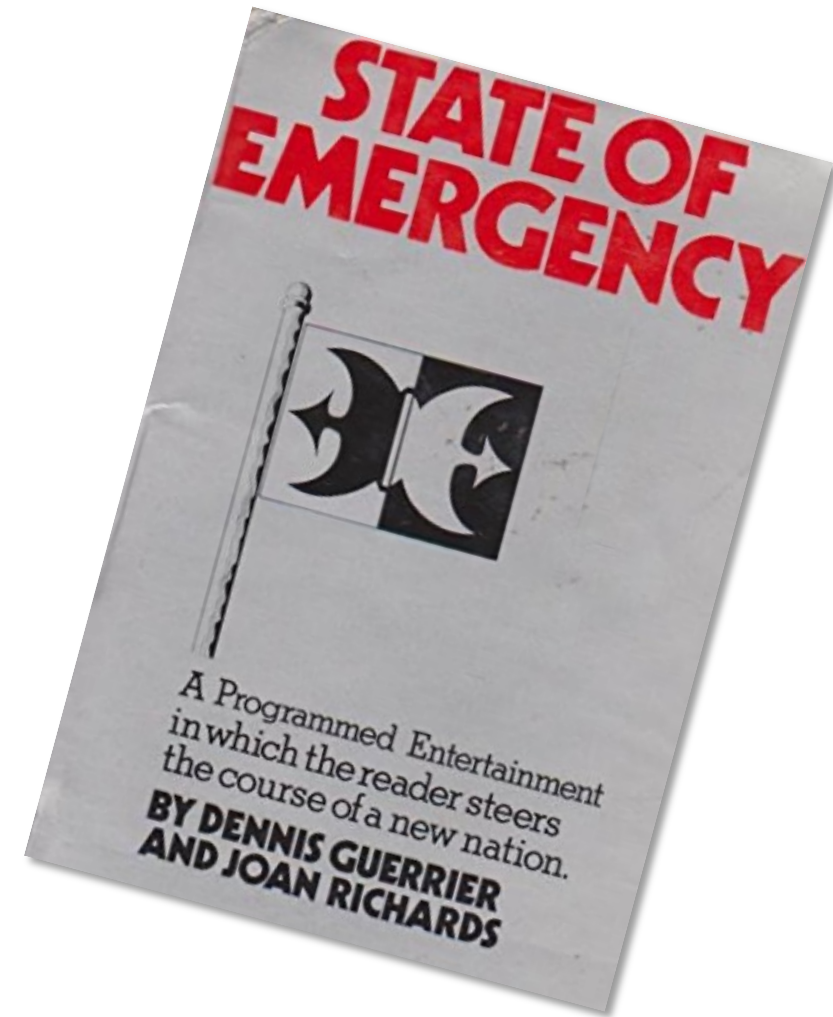
- Multi-page lexias corresponding to episodes in Les' life
- Each episode concludes with an explicit choice for the reader



State of Emergency (1969)

Crossover between hypertext fiction and programmed instruction

- Intent of book is to teach the reader about the challenges of running a newly-independent African state
- Coarse-grained (multipage) lexia
- Non-linear story



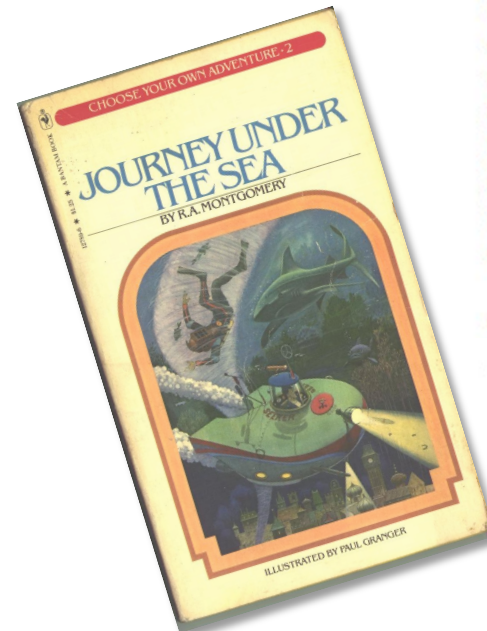
Choose Your Own Adventure (1979-)

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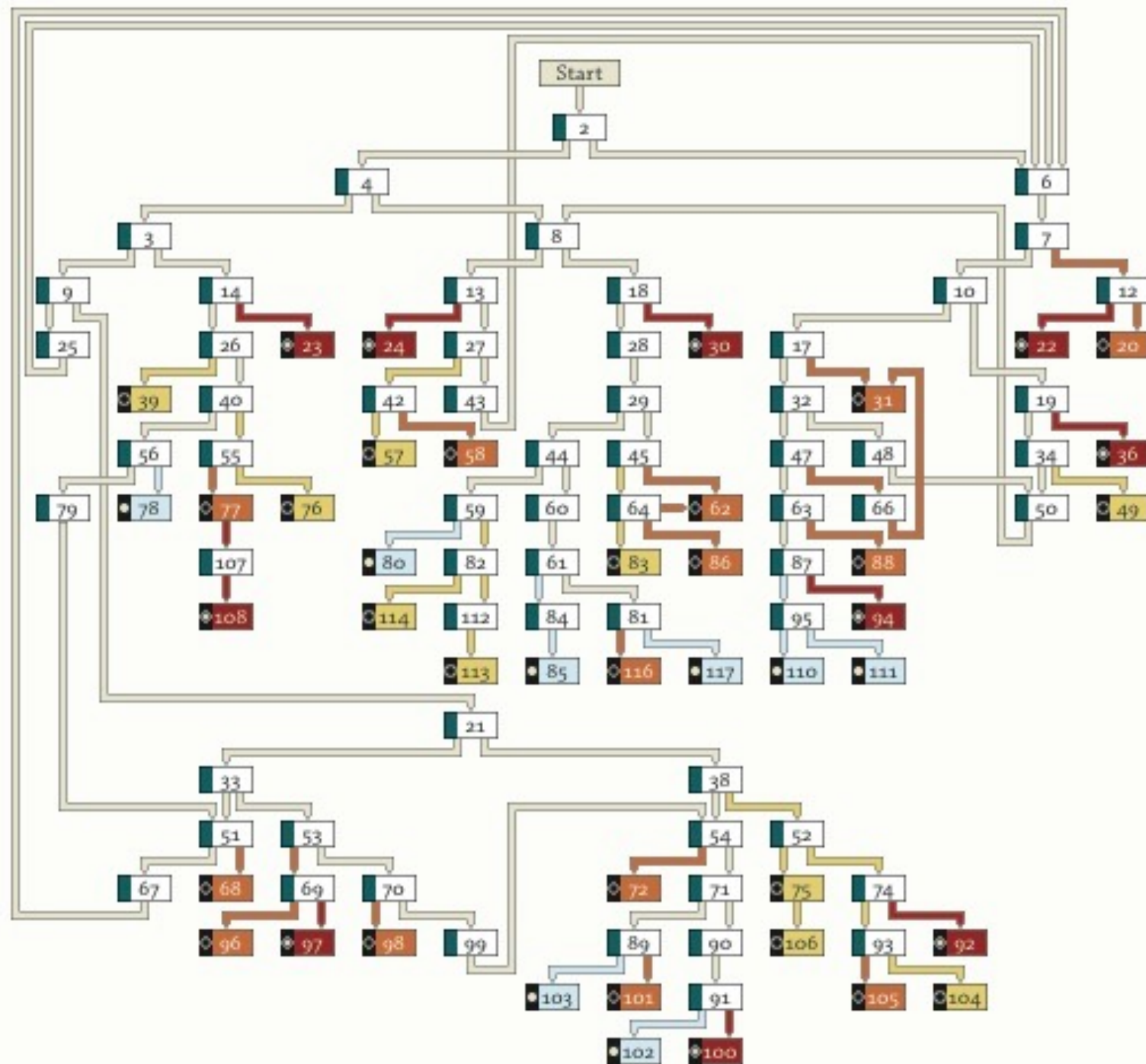
The cable attaching you to the *Maray* is extended to its limit. You have come to rest on a ledge near the canyon in the ocean floor that ancient myth says leads to the lost city of Atlantis.

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.

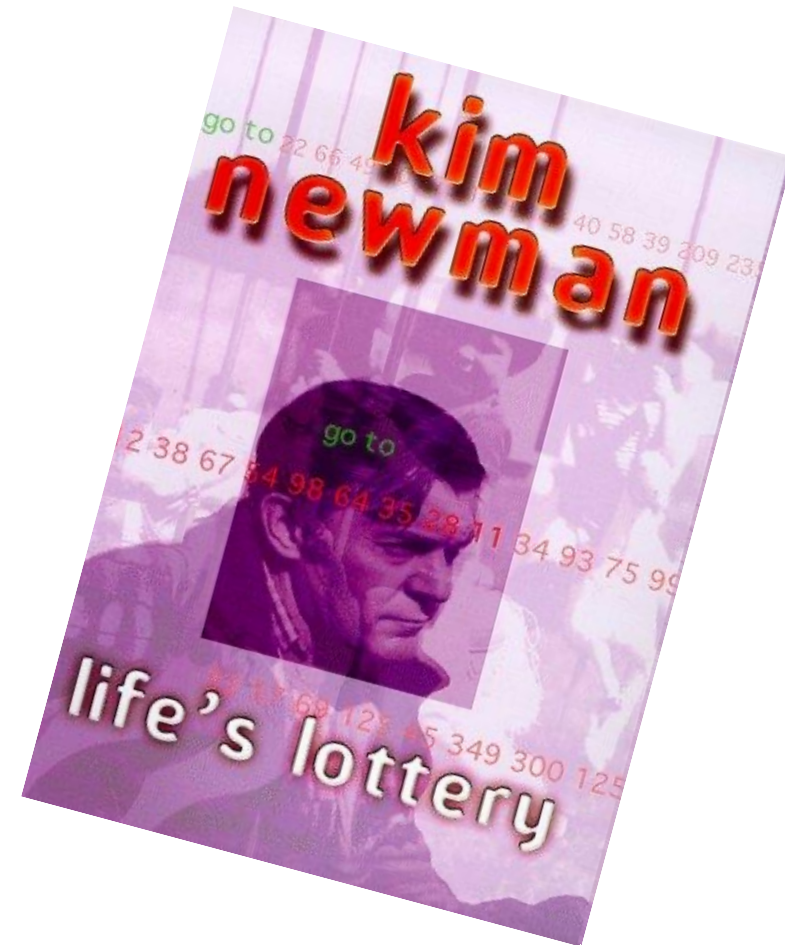
If you decide to cut loose from the Maray and dive with the Seeker into the canyon in the ocean floor, turn to page 4.



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



Next Lecture: Telling Tales, Part 2