

Hypertextual Narratives

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I outline my proposition for the workshop on Narrative and Hypertext. Using Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile* as examples, I describe how the hypertext can be used within physical, printed books, and how its characteristics multiply the possibilities of the book in general.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

A.0. [General Literature]: Fiction.

General Terms

Languages, Theory.

Keywords

Hypertextuality, Interactive, Narration.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the course of my PhD research, focused on the relationship between pictures and text in contemporary literature, I have devoted part of my work to the study of new kinds of narration, especially those relying on the hypertext. What interests me is not so much how the hypertext is used in, say, online or digital fiction, but rather how it is conveyed physically.

2. PROPOSITION

2.1 The hypertext as a reading function

Books, and more specifically novels, are by nature hypertextual objects. On a very general level, we could say that all words are linked together, and only make sense (as sentences) when considered in relation one with the other; this is basic linguistics.

However, the unit of the sentence is not the only place where hypertext is present in a book; we also find such relations between different paragraphs, or, more interestingly, between different pages. The latter is "more interesting" because when the reader is navigating back and forth between different pages, he involves the physical space in addition to the fictional space of the novel. For example, in a given chapter, a character who had not appeared for a long time reenters the narrative; the reader will thus be forced to pause his reading for a while, and go back several pages to find the previous mention of this character, recollect his main features, his motives, and generally replace him in the narrative before being able to go on. Such actions are frequent when reading a novel, and almost automatic, and yet they are crucial because they force the reader out of the diegetic universe of the novel, and back into his own. Thus, the proverbial "suspension of disbelief", and the immersion into a fictional universe, is broken, and the novel reminds its reader of the fictionality, the artificiality of what he is reading, sometimes brutally. By using the hypertext in such a way, even subtly, the book (through its author) also emphasizes its physicality since the reader will mark his current position in the narrative, flip back several pages, maybe even pick up another book if the narrative is divided between several tomes.

2.2 Hypertextual books

This is one way of using the hypertext in fiction, in a slightly interactive way; but some works go further and use the hypertext to the fullest extent possible. In the course of my work, I have focused primarily on two works: one novel – *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski – and one comic book – *Meanwhile* by Jason Shiga.

2.2.1 *House of Leaves*

House of Leaves uses the hypertext in a number of ways, the most obvious one being its prominent use of footnotes, in which portions of the narrative are hiding. Throughout the book, the reader navigates between different levels of narration (and of diegesis), one of them being a “commentator” of the main narrative, speaking solely in footnotes which sometimes take up whole pages. This narrative is fragmented, and therefore requires physical navigation from the reader, who will have to go back and forth between pages to obtain a coherent narration. Moreover, footnotes often call other footnotes, sometimes hundreds of pages away, which again force the reader to physically manipulate the book; and even sometimes go in circles in a labyrinth of footnotes, which lead nowhere but further away from the main narrative. A chapter in the book illustrates this in particular, reflecting this labyrinthine quality in its layout, reminiscent of a maze. The novel also frequently refers to appendixes, some present at the end of the book, other consisting of blank or “lost” pages. Other appendixes are photographs or drawing, which causes another kind of hypertext: the navigation between different semiotic systems. The novel also contains many codes or ciphers along its narrative, some relevant to the story, other being simply clever jokes; whole message boards are however dedicated to tracking, identifying and analyzing such ciphers, which many believe to hold the true meaning of a very dense and complex narrative. Footnotes also contain numerous allusions to other books, films, or paintings, inscribing *House of Leaves* into a web of real and fictional references. Finally, Danielewski has further emphasized the hypertextual nature of *House of Leaves* by leaving allusions to its universe in other works, such as *The Whales toe Letters or Only Revolutions*); thus the hypertext is not only within the book, it is also outside it.

2.2.2 *Meanwhile*

Meanwhile is a singular comic book, maybe closer to the “choose your own adventure books”. In those books, the narrative is extremely fragmented, and the reader is forced to pause frequently in his reading, and actually decide where the narrative is going to go. *Meanwhile* takes this notion of interactivity one step further by using a visual medium. Several scholars on comics, from Scott McCloud to Thierry Groensteen, have said that one

of its main characteristics was the relation between two panels, and more specifically the fact that it was the reader’s role to bridge the gap between two panels, and to piece the narrative together. This is particularly the case in *Meanwhile*, in which neither the narrative nor the layout of panels on the page is linear. Not only does the reader have to navigate through series of panels spread on the page in unusual patterns, but also he also frequently has to choose which way the narrative is going to go. Each time a choice is made, the reader has to follow a thread going out of the panel into the side of the page, which leads him to somewhere else in the book, through a clever system of tabs. Therefore, once again, the physicality of the book is reminded to the reader again and again, and the interactivity of the comic book form is multiplied tenfold. Furthermore, Shiga, like Danielewski, has hidden many codes and secrets in his book, not only to entertain the reader but also to allow him to have access to a broader and more complex narrative.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we see that in two very different mediums, the hypertext is used in similar ways, to achieve various goals. First, using the hypertext allows these authors to insist on the physicality of the medium they are using, as well as its interactivity. It also allows them to use this interactivity much more fully than they would have been able to in a classic, linear narrative; and finally, through playfulness, it allows them to achieve a more active relationship with their readers, which are more solicited than they probably are used to.

During the workshop, I would like to expand my brief outline of those two works, using them as examples of hypertextuality in traditional fiction. Other examples, which I have not talked about here (*Jimmy Corrigan* by Chris Ware, *The Raw Shark Texts* by Stephen Hall, etc.) can also be used to talk about hypertextuality. I would be interested to see what those examples could tell us about ways to use the hypertext more frequently in fiction, the advantages and drawbacks it could bring to novels and comic books. It would also be challenging to see how such models of hypertextuality could be used with other narratives, such as films, plays, or even musical works. Finally, we could ask ourselves if the physicality of such works is a necessity for them to use the hypertext to its fullest

extent, or if the same techniques could be used with similar results in e-books or digital comics.