

Towards a Politics of Reading: Narrative, Literary Hypertext and Meaning

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ABSTRACT

One of the problems of hypertext research is that it is balkanized. Literary hypertext represents an opportunity for writers, scholars of literature and computer science to find common ground, though their respective approaches, methodologies and research questions may seem strange and exotic. In this paper we broadly explain our interest in participating in the Workshop on Narrative and Hypertext (at the ACM's 2011 Hypertext Conference). We welcome the opportunity to present and discuss our ongoing research into the overarching question of the rôle of the hyperlink in narrative. We ask: does the hyperlink presume, demand, or require a new way of thinking about reading? Does literary hypertext change the relationship of text and reader? How do we synthesize competing theoretical models of reading in order to address the challenges of literary hypertext?

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: Literature. A.0 [General Literature]: General – *General literary works*. H.5.4 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Hypertext/Hypermedia – *user issues*.

General Terms

Theory.

Keywords

Literary criticism; Hypertext; Interactive fiction; Narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

In “No War Machine,” Stuart Moulthrop proposes a thought project:

Consider a generation for whom ‘words that yield’ are a regular occurrence, not a discursive anomaly. Consider readers and writers for whom jumps out of the system are commonplace, and who regularly articulate both hypertextual and hypotextual structures. Though this generation would still be undeniably linked by tradition and cultural continuity to our own, would they not have a fundamentally different understanding of texts

and textual enterprises? — Stuart Moulthrop,
“No War Machine”

The question of what is the textual enterprise is not new. However, we are in a moment when theories of reading and writing are proliferating, in part as a way of addressing works in a growing digital canon. Some of the theoretical work is predicated on the assumption that “hypertext is a new *set of textual conventions* and not [necessarily] a new textual *form*” [1]. In this light, theorizing about hypertext is merely a continuation of previous literary endeavors. Jim Rosenberg, expressing a quite different view, articulates a vision with the promise of a new syntax [13].

2. THE QUESTION

We have begun to develop a praxis of reading (how readers make sense from text). To begin we address the question, does the hyperlink demand, require, or presume a new way of thinking about reading? As literary critics, we are asked, for instance, to negotiate the paradox which pits subjective experience (phenomenology) against the building of, what Stanley Fish called, interpretive community (reader-response) [8]. As readers, the language of theory sometimes seems to fail to capture the attractions of literary hypertext and hypertext environments: can there be simple pleasure, what Douglas calls “satisfaction,” aesthetic or otherwise? [5] or is that an anachronistic desire?

Related questions which we will address are: how do literary hypertexts make meaning? Are the features commonly associated with hypertext: choice, fragmentation, indeterminacy, non-linearity, closure, multivocality, immateriality, navigation, found in other literary modes? And how do these features shape or challenge readers ability to make meaning?

Designers and authors may well ask themselves why do I return to the form? Does the conceit better reify my objective or is it exhausted? [4]

2.1 Our Approach

Using Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*, Stanley Fish’s concept of “interpretive community,” Wolfgang Iser’s observation that “Th[e] virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor it is the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination” [9, p.215]; and Peter Rabinowitz’s *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* as touchstones, we are taking three or four literary hypertexts as

exemplars/case studies to ask how do people read and make meaning from such texts.

2.2 The Texts

Specifically, we draw attention to older hypertexts, trying to apply these theories to see how much they account for in the experience of making meaning, and a later generation hypertext to work towards a politics of reading literary hypertext. We use Joey Dubuc's *Neither Either Nor Or* (2003; an existential parody of a children's Choose-Your-Own-Adventure narrative, written and illustrated by Dubuc), David Markson's *Vanishing Point* (2004; a postmodern epigrammatic novel), Raymond Federman's *Double of Nothing* (1971; an experimental novel which explores the traumatic effects of The Shoah on an immigrant to 1960s America) and Linda Carroli and Josephine Wilson's "A Woman is Standing" (1998; <http://ensemble.va.com.au/water/>). How do readers experience works like these? Can we unpack the theory and get to a praxis of reading?

To recap: we ask how readers make meaning from 'words that yield', texts with features that demand strategies of active reading and engagement with the text and its interface or material artifact. Likewise we will be examining the language theory gives us for talking about the triad of reader, text, and artifact. Then we are going to try to come to a working model of how readers making meaning from hypertexts.

We welcome the opportunity to share the conclusions from early stages of this work and to generate discussion of these topics across disciplines.

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