

The Network Concealed: Generative AI, Hypertext, and the Illusion of Immediacy

Generative AI systems are increasingly enjoyed as synthesisers of experience. Whether inviting users to "speak" with a Roman senator, inhabit the perspective of a Victorian railway worker, or explore an alternative version of an historical event, such systems appear to offer direct access to a period or perspective where in reality they are synthesising it from a myriad of conflicting sources. Arguably readers are mistaking an *intensification* of mediation for its absence; fortunately, hypertext fiction scholarship has spent decades interrogating similar problems and is thus well placed to investigate the phenomenon.

Drawing on Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation, this paper argues that the conversational interface most used for generative systems offers a distinctive variant of the *double logic of remediation*. Users are at some level aware they are accessing an immense network of heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory sources, yet the system's synthetic, unified response invites them to experience its output as *immediate*, in both senses of the word. The apparent encounter with a Victorian worker, for example, is not a direct experience of the past but a highly mediated synthesis of conflicting representations drawn from countless texts. When pressed, it will reveal its fabrications but in a manner that implies redress – you caught me out, but everything else is solid. Oh yes, apart from that. And that. And that. In this respect the experience best resembles sculptural hypertext, albeit one in which the user sets the rules that define the output.

Hypertext fiction (particularly more heavily 'authored' calligraphic hypertexts) provides a valuable counterpoint to this collapsing of complexity. Some scholars recognised this kind of networked textuality as enabling new forms of reader agency, while others argued these experiences remained dependent on highly structured mediation. These positions are not contradictory, it being possible to offer highly structured experiences that also facilitates engagement. We look both at, and through, the medium.

When it comes to reading, hypertext fiction is fundamentally a yielding form; links expose alternative pathways, competing contexts, the constructed nature of the reading experience. Routinely commencing with a centreless node offering tantalising links, the architecture around this node is revealed through the act of reading. Reading strategies are rarely exhaustive, however, with readers aware of the narrative 'dark matter' beyond their reach.

The conversational interface of generative AI operates differently. Rather than revealing the network through which meaning is produced, the architecture remains hidden within the fabric of the system: training data, weightings, alignment processes, system-level framing. Each interaction is unique and ephemeral, despite asserting a level of confidence suggestive of a secure and verifiable knowledge structure in the background.

This distinction has significant implications for authority and perspective. Hypertext traditions (scholarly, feminist, queer) used network textuality to preserve multiplicity and allow competing viewpoints to coexist without resolution. Generative systems tend instead toward synthesis; faced with contradiction, they typically produce a coherent

voice that *absorbs* difference into a unified response. These fundamentally different reading experiences help refine our understanding of reading networked texts.