

Access to Adventure or Automated Annihilation: AI paths into Hypertextual Storytelling's future

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CCS Concepts

• Applied computing → Media arts.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence, Storytelling, Hypertext

ACM Reference Format:

Charlie Hargood. 2026. Access to Adventure or Automated Annihilation: AI paths into Hypertextual Storytelling's future. In *Proceedings of Narrative and Hypertext Workshop, at ACM Hypertext 2026 (NHT '26)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1 page. <https://doi.org/XXXXXXX.XXXXXXX>

In answering NHT26's theme: "How are new technologies changing how we tell stories with Hypertext" we must confront the disruptive technology of our time: generative artificial intelligence. We might summarize its existing impact as research (use as a smart search engine), technology (in developing systems for hypertext), and content (as a co-author, editor, or automated author as well as artist). The last of these three is suspect (both in efficacy, and ethics [2]), but all three are undeniably present and forming paths forward.

Much is made of the dangers and potential of automated storytelling, in particular the "slop" that fill social media [7, 8]. Automated hypertextual storytelling slop is less prevalent, so far, but there is a potential future where the web, games, and other domains of hypertext stories are similarly drowned in the sea of AI automation. This has given rise to an emerging culture war [5] where creatives [9] and audiences [3], understandably concerned for the soul of their medium, fight against the technology while capitalists, more concerned with content than art, amplify it. As automation creeps into authorship, editing, and reviewing genuine creativity could struggle for attention. This path can lead to annihilation - either of the technology within our space when enough creatives and studios boycott it [5], or of our medium if it drowns in low quality mass content in a reflection of previous high quantity low quality crashes [4].

Another path is one of providing access. AI tools have thrived in the coding space in terms of accelerating development and providing access to software creation to wider audiences that may have been prevented by technical barriers. Our medium has grown with

every ladder over these barriers - from the genesis of Hypertext fiction in the fires of Hypercard and Storyspace [1], to evolution through the web and wikis, to contemporary authoring tools in Twine, Unity, and Unreal, and beyond [6, 10]. Every time the creating of hypertextual stories gets easier the chorus of creative voices gets louder, and with generative AI there are more opportunities for storytellers to overcome boundaries and develop hypertext.

Something less discussed in this space is how this may enable experimentation. Where as wild ideas, new link structures, new visualisations, or entirely new mediums may have come with the labour and risk of months of coding they may now be prototyped quickly. This is something critical to this latest evolution in that while CSTs may be build with a vision of mediums that exist, generative code can be more flexible, and as such we may find not only creative voices growing but experimentation - as low cost, low risk, adventures with quickly generated prototypes give rise to new mediums and forms.

As scholars in hypertextual storytelling it is on us to take back the narrative of the technology from capitalists that may drive it towards automated annihilation, and build tools and practices that bring the technology to creatives in a sustainable ethical manner. My position here is that this path is through access and the means to adventure in new mediums.

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NHT '26, September 14th, 2026, London, UK

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-XXXX-X/18/06

<https://doi.org/XXXXXXX.XXXXXXX>