# HYPERTEXT FICTION:
# AN ELECTRONIC GENRE IN DIGITAL LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

*In the present age we live in, what might be called 'the age of hyper reality' it is obligatory to know the new genre of electronic literature i. e. hypertext fiction. The present research paper provides a detailed consideration of the significance of the hypertext interface in influencing reader satisfaction, since very few papers, if any, integrate analysis of reading, narrative form, and the medium of delivery, which is considered crucially significant in this new story-telling environment. The paper examines and adapts existing models of reading and of interface design, using research methods adapted from literary studies and computer usability studies.*

*Keywords: Hypertext fiction, Semantisation, exploration, self-reflection, absorption.*

Computers are not, of course, newly domesticated wild animals but neither were the first computers intended to be used by individuals in their homes. Early computers were seen as mathematical tools, business tools and military tools. In 1974, Ted Nelson's insistence that ordinary people need computers was radical, though only a few years later the first commercial personal computers were being sold. Today, of course, computers are used as toys and as tools, for writing love letters and high school essays, for storing family photos and for writing and reading hypertext. Children in industrialised nations only rarely learn how to ride a horse or milk a cow, but will begin to learn to use a computer before they can read and write.

Electronic literature has seen an explosion in popularity in recent years, due largely to the wide availability of smart-phones, tablets, and dedicated e-reader devices. Somewhat surprisingly, mobile computing has been slow to embrace hypertext fiction. Yet the same qualities that make hand-held devices popular for traditional linear narratives small size, ease of use, and near ubiquity | also make them ideally suited for the distribution and consumption of hypertext narratives. In this paper, we review some existing systems for reading hypertext literature on mobile devices, and introduce Jarnaby Reader, a prototype e-reader for hypertext narratives that supports automatically generated overhead maps.

Hypertext fiction is not yet a familiar narrative form to readers of fiction, even though it has been available to the reading public since the publication on floppy disk of afternoon, a story

by Michael Joyce, in 1987. Despite enthusiasm and interest in the academic community, and dynamic creative output from writers themselves, hypertext fiction has not yet broken through to a wide audience. It is unclear why this should be. Hypertext fiction is a genre of electronic literature, characterised by the use of hypertext links which provide a new context for non-linearity in literature and reader interaction. The reader typically chooses links to move from one node of text to the next, and in this fashion arranges a story from a deeper pool of potential stories. Its spirit can also be seen in interactive fiction. The term can also be used to describe traditionally-published books in which a nonlinear narrative and interactive narrative is achieved through internal references. James Joyce's Ulysses (1922), Enrique Jardiel Poncela's LaTournée de Dios (1932), Jorge Luis Borges' The Garden of Forking Paths (1941), Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire (1962) and Julio Cortázar's Rayuela (1963; translated as Hopscotch) are early examples predating the word "hypertext", while a common pop-culture example is the Choose Your Own Adventure series in young adult fiction and other similar game books. The Garden of Forking Paths is both a hypertext story and a description of a fictional hypertext work.

Hypertext fiction is characterised by networked nodes of text making up a fictional story. There are often several options in each node of where the reader can go next. Unlike traditional fiction, the reader is not constrained by reading the fiction from start to end, and depending on the choices they make. In this sense, it is a bit like anencyclopaedia, with the reader reading a node and then choosing a link follow. While this can be done on paper, it is quite a different experience on a screen. The reader can be thrown into unpredictable loops because not all links are explained by their title. The fiction can contain text, quotes, and images. There are different forms which the hypertext fiction can take. These forms are axiel, arborescent, and networked. Axiel hypertext fictions have a central story line with links which branch off and return to the central storyline. Arborescent fictions branch into mutually exclusive story lines, and networked fictions have multiple starting points and do not always have a set ending. A single work of hypertext fiction can have a mixture of these three forms.

**Four Modes of Reading hypertext Fiction:**

Though we have known the phenomenon called hypertext for more than 50 years, and though it was realised through the World Wide Web for more than two decades ago, we still lack knowledge on the hypertext structure's impact on reading. Regarding hypertext fiction questions such as how do we read literary hypertexts, what are the preconditions for reading this kind of literature, and how can we describe different types of aesthetic experience and literary pleasure, are still of current interest. The complexity of reading does not increase as literature is turned into digital codes and utilises newer technological affordances, but the technological features, as semiotic and aesthetic means, emphasise and prefigure modes of reading in ways which would not be present in print literature.

## 1. Semantisation:

It is a mode grounded on an interaction between the reader and the text where "die Apellstructur" invites the reader to apply his literary codes. And thereby, we might add, the text protects its reader from losing control, from experiencing a lack of coherence, and from a lack of genre recognition. Regarding the degree of interactivity, this means that the hypertext reader is able to choose which links to click on. His choices are then based on semiotic considerations and information provided by categorised links or the organisation of links on the screen so the outcome of the reader's choice is to a large extent predictable. The reader might also experience that he is in control of making the text coherent through explicit cohesion markers, and that his preferences for meaning-making are preserved and confirmed.

## 2. Exploration:

It reflects an attitude where the reader is less concerned about where his is taken as long as he is taken somewhere. This mode of reading is then motivated by travelling and discovering, more than a search for a specific meaning. Here we have entered a realm of hypertext fiction which takes chance as one of its main principles. Chance, according to Roberto Simanowski (2003), is used as

> An aesthetic means of going beyond traditional, familiar and predictable ways of seeing and describing things.

As he describes the rule of alea in literature. And we might add that chance is also an aesthetic means to make the reader give up his desire for control and his aspirations for predictability. Iser also identifies chance as an aesthetic means in print literature and associates it with a mode of reading where the pleasure is related to discovering something new. In order to gain new experience, Iser (1993).writes:

We have to put our own code at stake and be guided by an aleatory rule in literature.

Just like print and electronic literature, computer games also have their moments of randomness. According to Bartle unpredictability favours those players who are oriented towards exploration, and who find pleasure in having the game surprise them. Bartle calls these players 'the explorers' and just like the reading mode I have identified here as 'exploration.' Bartle (1996:3) opines:

These players try to find out as much as they can about the virtual world.

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### 3. Self-reflection:

A hypertext, just like any text, can also be approached from the standpoint of playing a role. Computer technology easily offers ways to fool the reader by simulating a real person, or making the reader believe he is communicating with a real person, or making the reader believe that what he sees and hears is real.

The point is that the fictional world appears coherent and reality-like. It is as if we are in touch with reality through the computer. Rather than bringing different messages, sound and visuals have the same content. The sense of reality is heightened when they align. The imitation of reality gives the reader the opportunity to play a role, being someone else or being somewhere else. As the reader is drawn into this reality-like fiction, he is invited to activate his own codes. In this connection in his theory on the reading of print literature, writes Iser (1993:96): Activation makes the reader into a player allowed to watch himself or herself playing a role.

The self-present in the fictional world is an experience of how the reader's own codes constitute the text-game mimicry. The pleasure is here related to a self-enjoyment in the enjoyment of being someone else or being somewhere else. This is what Iser calls "aesthetic enjoyment", which is, according to Iser, the quintessence of aesthetic experience, the "self enjoyment in the enjoyment of something other" (Iser, 1993:278). In this self-enjoyment the reader becomes aware of his own codes, his own experiences and expectations, and this awareness turns the reading into a self-reflective mode of reading.

Jill Walker's (2003:65) enjoyable description of her e-friendship with Caroline, the fictional protagonist in the 24-part online drama Online Caroline, illustrates the role-playing:

> I connect my computer to the network, sipping my morning coffee. My hair is still wet from the shower when I check my email and find it there in between other messages: an email from Caroline. I read it quickly and then visit her web site. She's waiting for me. She holds a shirt she's just bought up to the webcam so I can see it, asking me afterwards by email whether I'd like her to send it to me. "Yes", I answer, clicking and typing my responses into the web form and giving her my physical address. Caroline knows I like coffee and she knows I read her email in the morning. Caroline and I are friends."

### 4. Absorption:

There is one more approach to be distinguished from those outlined so far. This embodies the most intensive absorption of the reader in the hypertext. Absorption is a mode of reading

which can be described as pursuing vertigo, prefigured by hypertexts which keep their readers so busy that their efforts to discover meaning, intentional or accidental, or play a role as being someone else or being somewhere else, falls apart, so the readers' more or less only option is to slide into the text and let themselves be absorbed into the play of textual elements.

Absorption might be considered as what Roland Barthes calls the pleasure of the text. Barthes describes the pleasure of the text as an experience of the site of loss, where language is never anything but the site of its effect: "what pleasure wants is the site of loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation" (Barthes 1975:7). In multimodal hypertexts the pleasure might be linked to a comfortable practice of reading where the reader is being seduced by the combination and organisation of modalities, as well as by the semiotic mobility and blankness of its effect. This aesthetic experience might be pleasurable and enjoyable, but it might just as well be a frightful and frustrating one. Not least because it seems like much of the hypertext fiction that prefigures absorption invert literary conventions. The lack of coherence, the lack of genre recognition, and the impossibility of creating a stable meaning or in other ways controlling the text, keep the reader in a condition of confusion. A somewhat similar mode of reading to the one I have called absorption is found in the theory of Barthes (Barthes 1975) and Iser (Iser 1993). Barthes' concept "the pleasure of the text" and what Iser calls "the most intensive absorption of the reader in the text game" (ibid.278) describes a mode of reading where the text is rocking the readers cultural and psychological foundations, bringing the reader to a crisis in the understanding of language. And if we turn towards computer games Bartle describes a type of player whose main interest lies in sabotaging the game, going against established conventions and expectations for how to play the game. Bartle calls these kinds of players "the killers", as they make it more or less impossible for other players, like "the achievers" or "the socialiser", to play the game the way they prefer. "The killers" then inflict distress and frustration on other players.

Thus it can be concluded that, in the age of hyper reality and hyper sensitivity, hypertext is a novel genre which give the readers of literature a new way of comprehending literature.

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