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Hypertext Fiction Ever After

Stuart Moulthrop

There are at least two ways to sketch the genealogy of hypertext fiction. From the perspective of literary theory, most influentially in Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997), hypertext fiction counts as one among many instances of ergodic expression. This broad-minded approach allows us to associate the form with a number of distinct but similar ventures, such as Malloy's query-based "narrabase" stories, John McDaid's "modally appropriate" artefactual fiction, various attempts at text generation, from the ELIZA script of the late 1960s to Daniel Stern and Michael Mateas' *Façade*—and perhaps most significantly, the long tradition of text-based computer gaming, beginning with *Colossal Cave Adventure* in the mid-1970s and continuing today. Electronic literature and digital art contain many forms and practices besides hypertext fiction. If we want to consider both tree and forest, we need to see this genre as a machinic inflection of the general project of experimental writing.

A second approach to hypertext fiction might focus on the underlying technology. The term *hypertext* was invented by Theodor Holm Nelson in the mid-1960s, referring to possibilities for "non-sequential writing" made possible by digital storage and retrieval (Barnet 2000: 65). In Nelson's conception, the process of intertextual reference is automated by computable code that instantly combines one document with another. The idea came to be associated with the disjunctive, linked-node model of the World Wide Web—the kind of linking Nelson once lampooned as "diving

boards into the darkness.”¹ His conception has always been much richer, involving “transclusion,” in which documents are deeply and dynamically interfused.

Nelson was partly inspired by Vannevar Bush’s concept for a mechanical system for associative research (“Memex”), proposed at the end of the Second World War (Nyce and Kahn 1991). In the late 1960s Douglas Engelbart’s groundbreaking NLS/Augment system made the first steps toward implementation of the hypertext concept (Barnet 2000: 37–64). As personal computers arrived over the following decade, academic researchers and software designers developed the concept further. The Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) launched a research conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia in 1987. The heyday of hypertext may well have been 1987–2004, when Apple Computer supported HyperCard, a product that allowed users of the company’s machines to create complex, multicursal assemblies of information, employing image, text, sound, and simple animation. The apotheosis of this early development phase came with the arrival of yet another system, in November 1990, when Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau proposed a hypermedia system called “The World-Wide Web” (Berners-Lee et al. 2000). After the web’s advent, hypertext moved from concept to utility, becoming as ubiquitous as indoor plumbing and electricity. Billions of humans daily encounter the curious expression *http://* (usually in the address bar of a browser) without much awareness that this formula invokes *Hypertext Transfer Protocol*.

Hypertext fiction was in some sense a byproduct of this emergent phenomenon. Long before the turn of the century, writers of late- and postmodernist print fiction such as William S. Burroughs, John Barth, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, and Kathy Acker had accustomed readers to difficult, recursive, and counterfactual narratives. Jorge Luis Borges’ conceptual fictions provided intriguing examples, including the germinal “Garden of Forking Paths,” effectively a blueprint for hypertextual storytelling. Borges’ “Aleph” and “Book of Sand” furnished imaginary frameworks for the first working formula of hypertext fiction: “a story that would change each time you read it” (“our story”). The first implementation of this formula was Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story*, written between 1985 and 1987 and presented at the inaugural ACM Hypertext Conference

¹Though I am certain this phrase belongs to Ted Nelson, I am no longer sure of the occasion. My best guess is his keynote address at the 2001 Digital Arts and Culture Conference at Brown University, “Toward a True Electronic Literature” (April 2001). Jennifer Fraser of Carleton University cites the phrase in her thesis for the Master of Architecture degree. Given that her thesis was written in 1999, the first occurrence may have been earlier than the Brown talk. See “Visualising Hypertext Narrative,” http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk1/tape2/PQDD_0020/MQ48371.pdf.

as proof-of-concept for Storyspace, the authoring system created by Joyce and Jay David Bolter (with additional credit to John B. Smith).

Also present at the ACM gatherings, destined for an important part in that community's further evolution, was Mark Bernstein, a research chemist turned software designer who had developed his own system, HyperGate, and with Erin Sweeney co-authored one of the first nonfiction hypertexts, *The Election of 1912*. The publishing house Bernstein founded, Eastgate Systems, Inc., would eventually re-publish *afternoon* as well as the Storyspace application and a substantial array of works, including cultural criticism (Diane Greco's *Cyborg: The Body Electric*), philosophical commentary (David Kolb's *Socrates in the Labyrinth*), poetry (Stephanie Strickland's *True North*), as well as fiction. Many of these titles appeared in the *Eastgate Review of Hypertext*, a groundbreaking digital publication.

Bernstein's catalog grew to include hypertexts developed in systems other than Storyspace (Sarah Smith's *King of Space*, Judy Malloy's *its name was Penelope*, Deena Larsen's *Marble Springs*, John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*, and Malloy and Catherine Marshall's *Forward Anywhere*). Eastgate also became a venue for projects from Brown University's Literary Arts program. Brown had been an important site for hypertext development from early days, largely owing to efforts by Andries Van Dam, George Landow, and Robert Coover. All three of these figures were influential in the writing program, which produced important titles including Mary-Kim Arnold's *Lust*, the various experiments collected by Landow in *Writing at the Edge*, and Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley's *My Name is Captain, Captain*, all of which would eventually be published by Bernstein. The most celebrated product of the Eastgate-Brown nexus was Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), a fantasia that interfused *Frankenstein*, pastiche, literary affiliation, feminist writing, monstrous invention, and hypertextual sensibility. After Joyce's *afternoon* and *Twilight*, *A Symphony* it is the most widely read and analyzed example from the Eastgate catalog, and arguably the most significant for literary history.

To be sure, Eastgate Systems, Inc. represents only one leafy branch in a larger digital forest. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Stein's Voyager Company brought out a line of exquisitely designed, groundbreaking multimedia hypertexts, some of which were developed from prior print publications as "Expanded Books."² Apple's HyperCard powered important experiments in hypertextual writing and design, from Brian Thomas' *If Monks Had Macs* to *Beyond Cyberpunk!* by Gareth Branwyn and Mark Frauenfelder. Rand and Robyn Miller, creators of the epic video games *Myst* and *Riven*, began by making HyperCard-based works for children.

²See Nat Hoffelder, "What eBooks Looked Like 20 Years Ago," <http://the-digital-reader.com/2013/07/04/what-ebooks-looked-like-20-years-ago-video/>.

As the World Wide Web became established, hypertextual writing found its way there, in venues including Mark Amerika's *Alt-X*, the *Iowa Review*'s web extension, and online journals such as *New River* and *Postmodern Culture*. Joyce produced an important web fiction, "Twelve Blue," in 1996. Jackson wrote a revealing reflection on hypertextual literary aesthetics ("Stitch Bitch") around the same time. This writer followed his Eastgate fiction *Victory Garden* (1991) with a series of web hypertexts, including "Hegirascope" (1995) and "Reagan Library" (1998). Talan Memmott's "Lexia to Perplexia" (2000) significantly raised the bar both in terms of code-infused language and language-driven coding. Caitlin Fisher's "These Waves of Girls" (2000), the first hypertext fiction to win a major national award, was also written for the web.

Though this chapter focuses on fiction, we need at least a friendly glance at the electronic poetry (ePoetry) movement, fostered in large part by Loss Pequeño Glasier of SUNY Buffalo, which in our arboreal metaphor figures as a large and flourishing growth in a nearby patch of sunshine. Along with the ePoetry Center at Buffalo, a major academic archive of digital literature is provided by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), an artistic and academic formation promoting the creation, circulation, and preservation of born-digital verbal art. ELO was founded in 1999 by Scott Rettberg, co-author of the hypertext fiction *The Unknown*, along with Robert Coover and others. ELO has published three volumes of its *Electronic Literature Collection* (2006, 2011, 2016), with more anticipated. These collections feature a variety of types and genres, including hypertext fiction.

Hypertext fiction has proved fertile ground for numerous theorists of contemporary writing. Given Bolter's background as a system designer and hypertext author (a version of his book *Writing Space* served as another demonstration text for Storyspace), we can at last suggest a connection to *Remediation*, the foundational guide to understanding new media written by Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999). Though their term *hypermediacy* encompasses much more than digital hypermedia, it could be argued that the latter provided at least some inspiration for the former. Dave Ciccoricco has devoted two books to digital narrative (*Reading Network Fiction*, 2007 and *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media*, 2015). Narrative theorists such as Marie-Laure Ryan (*Cyberspace Textuality*, 1999; *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 2001) and Markku Eskelinen (*Cybertext Poetics*, 2012) have vigorously debated the implications of hypertext and related systems for narratology. N. Katherine Hayles has provided the most complete and careful consideration of hypertext fiction per se, using it as one basis for her doctrine of *medium-specific analysis* (MSA), an approach to mediated expression that recognizes the interfusion of medium and message (Hayles 2008).

However influential, hypertext fiction was only one expression of a developing idea; Nelson's quip about "diving boards" should never be forgotten. Node-link hypertext was always a dangerously constraining

model (see Rosenberg), and even in early days there were important moves beyond its constraints. “Reagan Library” (1998) lampoons headlong link-diving by including links unpredictably generated by an algorithm. “Lexia to Perplexia” plays with color, typography, and other conventions associated with links in Hypertext Markup Language, even as it exposes the language of web coding within its literary discourse. Morrissey and Talley’s *Jew’s Daughter* (2000) radically deconstructs the node-link convention by replacing the usual transitional links with calls to a program that dynamically recomposes the destination text.

From a certain point of view, all this creative fermentation is a thing of the past. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, hypertext fiction and hypertext literature generally seemed in eclipse, if not oblivion. The noncommercial gift economy of the early World Wide Web made business exceedingly difficult for companies like Eastgate Systems, Inc. and Voyager. The latter folded after a brief, brilliant run. Eastgate carries on, in 2014 releasing an updated version of *Patchwork Girl* accessible to current-generation Macintosh systems, followed by a new version of Storyspace. Without a ready market, however, Eastgate’s backlist has largely fallen to obsolescence. Most of its titles have not been updated to versions compatible with contemporary operating systems and so can be accessed only on vintage equipment.

These developments have not deterred dedicated readers. In 2010 Alice Bell published *The Possible Worlds of Hypertext Fiction*, examining four Eastgate titles as aesthetic explorations of potential ontology, a compelling way to think about branching narratives. Implicit in Bell’s title, as her final chapter makes clear, is a critique both trenchant and hopeful. In some ways hypertext works seem impossible, unreadable, or at least unmarketable fictions. It is not clear that large numbers of people have time and patience for intensely complex narratives. Though critics like Steven Johnson have observed that film, television, and video games have recently featured precisely this kind of storytelling (Johnson 2006), there is a notable difference of degree between the relentless variations of *afternoon* and the more modest ramifications of *The Sopranos* or even *Mass Effect*. Closer affinity with hypertext and hypermedia may occur in films like Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014) and *Dunkirk* (2017), or Mark Kelly’s *Southland Tales* (2006). Steven Shaviro (2009) describes this last film as “post-cinematic,” in large part because it presents the viewer with an incomprehensibly intense, overloaded rendering of space and time. According to Steven Shaviro, post-cinematic film proceeds from a fundamental shift:

I think it is safe to say that these changes are massive enough, and have gone on long enough, that we are now witnessing the emergence of a different media regime, and indeed of a different mode of production, than those which dominated the twentieth century. Digital technologies,

together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and experiencing lived experience.

(Shaviro 2009: 2)

Tracing Shaviro's "different mode of production" beyond cinema, we might see hypertext fiction as the literary equivalent of the post-cinematic, a beyond-literary writing meant for some world other than the one we inhabit. It might in fact belong to what Kenneth Goldsmith has called "the new illegibility," a shift toward texts that defy mere personal consumption because they belong to the regime of computers, networks, and distributed intelligence (Goldsmith 2011: 159). It has long been suggested that hypertext fiction seems written mainly for writers of hypertext fiction—texts only an author can love. Yet if we follow the conceptual links to Shaviro and Goldsmith, we may find an even more dismal conclusion: hypertext fiction is, properly speaking, written not even for its author, but at the mysterious whim of some machine. In this sense, even though it operates within the familiar domain of written words, hypertext fiction may belong to the same post-human aesthetic suggested by Mark B. N. Hansen's *Feed Forward* (2015), positing "a fundamental re-thinking of the human and of human experience as a non-optional complement to the new figure of the network" (2).

Though, as a good possible-worlds theorist might say, this is only one place to take one's thinking. The post-human turn is not absolutely ordained. Other destinations are possible. Even under radical regime change, the future may be a question of what branch we choose to follow. Bell herself sees sufficient room for optimism to issue a limited call to action:

Finally, the scholars of hypertext fiction and digital texts generally must publicize their work to the wider academic community. A failure to disseminate work more widely will mean that this area of research remains detrimentally niche. The fascinating narrative experiments that digital texts are capable of will be kept hidden and the methodological advances that will inevitably be made within hypertext theory will remain undisclosed. Both scenarios will disadvantage both print and digital scholarship.

(2010: 192)

In any honest cultural accounting the "wider academic community" is probably just a slightly larger "niche," so the glimmer of hope expressed here may be faint. Yet Bell does at least believe in some larger value for hypertext fiction, if only (echoing Eskelinen 2012) to inform a less print-centric study of narrative. Hypertext fiction can at least find its cell in the scholarly cloister along with twelve-tone music, non-Euclidean architecture, and object-oriented ontology. These things matter enormously to those

who know why. To most people, even most educated people, they remain obscure. If we are solely concerned with texts produced at the end of the last century, this may well be where the weird story ends.

But like any good hypertext, this story escapes its particular ending by way of a timely restart.

The demise of hypertext fiction is regularly disproved by the flourishing existence of a software platform called Twine. According to its developers, Twine is “an open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories” (Twinery.org 2020). The original system was created in 2009 by Chris Klimas, an independent software developer. As an open-source application, it has been refined and expanded by various collaborators comprising the self-organizing “Twine team.” Though it belongs to a different time and situation, Twine looks hauntingly familiar to an old hypertext hand. It shares the standard hypertext convention of directed graphs in which boxes (nodes) represent occasions for the presentation of various media forms (words, by default). Nodal boxes are connected by lines indicating the presence of a linked term or other mechanism that can trigger the replacement of one state by another: in most cases, the familiar action of the hypertext link. Accounts of Twine productions can produce flashbacks to the 1990s, for those who are susceptible. For instance:

In Bryan Reid’s *for political lovers, a little utopia sketch*, clicking on links cycles the text through a series of possibilities – occupations, places, dreams – that reflect the hopeful tone of the work. Clicking the verbs in certain sentences cycles them through a dreamy set of options: translating, training dogs, becoming an astronomer, growing vegetables, building houses, and so on.

(Kopas 2015: 11)

This description could apply to any number of examples produced by students some of us have known over the years, or to works of certain old hands themselves.

Time-tripping aside, Twine both is and is not a hypertext system. On the affirmative side, it is designed to create logically controlled, multiply-traversable presentations intended for reception via the World Wide Web and Hypertext Transfer Protocol. In this sense Twine is a structured authoring system for web hypertext—something hypertext researchers have struggled to implement since the web began. The affordances of the program are in many ways reminiscent of Intermedia, KMS, TIES, and other old-time tools, though Twine’s functions and visual conventions are generally less ambitious than those of older systems.

The relative simplicity of Twine is intentional. Though it is already evolving into new areas of application, Twine was designed for a specific purpose: the making of “interactive stories.” Note that the Twine team do

not say *hypertext fictions*. If hypertext fiction falls into the “new illegible,” then this choice represents a stubborn neo- or retro-humanism, a refusal to give up the proposition that *we*—a broad cohort in no way limited to niche-bound academics—still have stories to share. In this sense, even if grizzled veterans think of Twine as a second coming of directed graphs, and Twine’s branching narratives as hypertext fictions, these opinions are irrelevant. For its community of users, Twine has little or nothing to do with hypertext fiction. Twine is for games.

Tellingly, the first substantial retrospective on Twine works is a book called *Videogames for Humans* (Kopas 2015). This tome is a 500-plus-page collection of transcribed play sessions from Twine games (the preferred descriptor), interspersed with commentary by the players, some of whom are also Twine authors. Though even such a generous survey is bound to have some bias, the book, and especially Merritt Kopas’ artful introduction, does leave a few clear impressions about Twine works.

First, the cultural milieu of Twine games differs appreciably from that of hypertext fiction. The terms *game* and *interactive story* affiliate the form more closely with Interactive Fiction (IF), a distinct genre of cybertext where narrative development is governed by logics more complex than the simple destination coding of a conventional hypertext link. According to Nick Montfort, who has written the definitive account of IF, the key element of such works is a multivariate *world model* expressed in the form of a computer program (Montfort 2005: 23). Purists might argue that Twine games lack this level of sophistication, making these objects either (in the generous view) hybrids of hypertext and interactive fiction, or (more skeptically) hypertexts that imitate interactive fictions.

In Bell’s terms, both IF and Twine games occupy the same sort of localized “niche” as hypertext fiction. It is characteristic of life in a niche, or a small town, to feel a certain ambivalence toward the bright lights of the big city. In the case of hypertext fiction, these feelings took the form of strange literary embraces, as in *Victory Garden*’s pastiche of Borges and *Patchwork Girl*’s abduction of Mary Shelley. Twine writers seem similarly anxious, but not about the formal, book-bound canon. Tellingly, they use without regret the model of Choose Your Own Adventure stories, an allegedly juvenile form that once made hypertext writers cringe when the comparison was applied. Twine writers seem more at home with a literary inner child, and crucially with the concept of play—though play and games can also be grounds of contention. According to one commentator, Twine writers are “using interactive media to tell stories that mainstream videogames wouldn’t dream of telling” (Kopas 2015: 11).

Once upon a time, hypertext fiction writers said similar things about their work vis-à-vis mainstream fiction; but we were usually talking about form, emphasizing the ability to do things with language that cannot be done on the printed page. The themes and subjects of hypertext fictions,

to the extent one can generalize, did not diverge all that strongly from the main tradition. Literary culture at the end of the century was, however imperfectly, able to value social and sexual resistance. The coming-out story of J Yellowlees Douglas' *I Have Said Nothing* (1992) makes for a rich and powerful hypertext, but it might also work, in a different way no doubt, as a page-bound memoir. Shelley Jackson's exploration of monstrous embodiment body could be mapped readily enough onto other forms of *écriture féminine*, as Jackson herself does in "Stitch Bitch." With some notable exceptions, Jackson's later efforts have consisted largely of novels and stories. The hypertextual excursion was thus perhaps more demonstration than existential revolution. Literature forgave the rupture—and perhaps forgot.

In challenging the industry and culture of video games, Twine writers have taken on an adversary much less generous with difference, and in some ways openly hostile to social and sexual nonconformity. In so doing they have put themselves at risk of actual violence. Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) Twine game so far is *Depression Quest*, written by Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Shankler. The game is essentially a simulator of depressive thought and behavior, a remarkable use of interactive narrative to inform, educate, and recruit empathy. Released on the Steam game market in 2013, the game has instead stirred up epic levels of enmity. It has become the center of a "culture war" (Hudson 2014) that has broken out among independent game developers and reviewers, and has now spread to other aspects of game culture (Fangone 2015), to the science fiction and fantasy community (Minkel 2015), and most recently into the general body politic (see Nagle 2017).

As part of this conflict, popularly known as *Gamergate*, Quinn and other women in the game world have suffered threats of rape and murder, release of personal information (*doxing*), and other forms of harassment including bomb threats called in to conference venues where targeted women were to speak (Rousseau 2015). The details of the conflict are too numerous, complicated, and dismal to discuss here. Those who restrict themselves to the controversy over *Depression Quest* sometimes cast it as an argument about lax professional standards in game reviewing and the independent game community. For those who take a broader view, the matter has more to do with backlash against perceived invasion of a homogenous, heterosexual, male-dominated subculture by people with different attitudes and identities. In this sense the culture war may not be so different from the one declared by religious conservatives in the 1990s, though carried now into fresh zones of conflict. Back in the day, that conflict inspired at least one hypertext fiction (*Victory Garden*), but today the stakes seem enormously higher.

Twine writers may not appreciate being folded in with hypertext fiction, though on technical grounds the common traits between old and new seem undeniable. Socially speaking the resemblance is more debatable. Twine

writers seem less interested in high-cultural approbation, better adapted to dynamics of social media, and more interested in taking their fight to institutions that academics often shun. Also, of course, they tend to be a whole lot younger than those of us who flourished in the Clinton administration. Still, an old hand must feel solidarity with the Twine community and their struggle to bring change to popular culture.

Looking out from the monastic niche, with the benefit of experience, we might see the Twine movement as the next step in a cultural logic in which hypertext fiction once played its part—though the scene is terribly different now. As we once did, Twine writers want to do unlikely things with stories, making the most of simple, easily accessible technologies. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they are agents of a vital digital literacy, asserting word-based text, both in terms of prose and underlying code, as the locus of seriously meaningful play.

Beyond this, as their enemies will say, they have an agenda, setting out to defend the interests of women, gay and transgender people, the neuro-atypical, and others marginalized and excluded by the military-infotainment complex. They are discontented with an arrogant, intolerant, casually violent society, and have set themselves against an entrenched culture industry. They have much more at risk, partly because they are intervening in a commercially important space; also because structures that once protected critical behavior (academic tenure and other channels of cultural capital) have significantly eroded since the Reagan years. However they think of what they do—as play, as storytelling, or as an occupation of gamespace—they are carrying on a struggle. Hypertext fiction may never get out of the cloister, but its younger cousins have found their way to the streets.

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