



Hypertext: Foe to Print?

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Hypertext literature first emerged with more than a little saber rattling. In 1991 Bolter hailed it as a natural outcome of "the exhaustion of printed literature." [1] A year later Landow claimed that writers of print literature "*should* feel threatened by hypertext, just as writers of romances and epics should have felt threatened by the novel and Venetian writers of Latin tragedy should have felt threatened by the *Divine Comedy* and its Italian text. Descendants, after all, offer continuity with the past but only at the cost of replacing it." [2] That same year Coover gave us an article about hypertext literature provocatively entitled "The End of Books." [3]

With their implication that hypertext is likely to make linear print obsolete, such stances have helped attract attention to the medium, but ultimately they also focused a lot of undue hostility upon it. Laura Miller's peevish attack on hypertext in the *New York Times Book Review* argues that because linear storytelling ain't broke, we should steer clear of something like hypertext that tries to "fix" it. [4] This is a little like claiming that because there was nothing wrong with live theater, the introduction of the newer form of the novel was pointless. Who wants to read a description of a story when you could see it acted out before you?

I have found that most hypertext fans (myself included) view linear writing and hypertext as complementary rather than antithetical art forms, each with its own unique merits and possibilities. Undoubtedly many works that would in an earlier time have been realized as epic poems ended up as novels instead, but the novel did not kill poetry or book-length poems. Similarly, hypertext fiction is

unlikely to kill linear fiction, even were it to become as wildly popular as video games. It is, however, causing many authors to divert their efforts from print to the computer screen if they have an impetus toward multilinear expression or simply the desire to try something new.

Many authors—including Ed Falco, Shelley Jackson, and Christy Sheffield Sanford—continue to publish in print while pursuing hypertext. Of course, there are purely practical reasons for a writer not to put all her eggs in the hypertext basket. The print literature establishment is still the primary gatekeeper for large readerships, critical recognition, awards, grants, and teaching positions. Printed work is also more resistant to the ravages of time. There are also purely artistic attractions to working within the linear constraints of print. An author need not give these up in order to master the medium of hypertext, just as a poet need not renounce poetry in order to venture into fiction writing. One can love the true open-endedness of hypertext while still appreciating the potency of the true ending—the joint between writing and reality, the charged moment when perception shifts from page to world.

For many years, my own output as a poet was almost exclusively hypertextual. An overriding passion to create poetry as far removed as possible from the conventions of the printed page led me to immerse my creative process completely in the computer. It wasn't that I'd made a deliberate decision to stop writing for print, it was just that my apprenticeship to the new electronic medium was so engrossing and time-consuming I never got around to going back to the venerable old medium.

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<http://www.wordcircuits.com/comment/htlit.htm>

Then it happened: Repetitive Strain Injury. Problems with my hands forced me to severely limit my time on the computer. I've pretty much recovered from that now, thanks to all sorts of unpleasant alternative input devices. But during that period when I was forced to use the computer sparingly, I began to realize that, hey, pen and paper aren't so bad after all. I developed a new pleasure in the joys of ink and now divide my time between poetry for the page and for the screen.

I think that working in both media can be good for a writer. For one thing, it can help ensure that when one turns to hypertext, the result will be truly hypertextual to the core. If a work emerges as basically linear in nature, it will end up in print rather than as an electronic piece in which the hypertext is merely window dressing. Work can be rerouted in the other direction as well. Some of my poems that were originally intended for print ended up becoming electronic pieces. [5] When structural problems arise in a linearly conceived work, I don't feel compelled to solve them on paper if hypertext solutions would be more successful.

Clearly print works and hypertexts can coexist harmoniously in an author's oeuvre. Can print and hypertext incarnations of the same work, however, stand happily side-by-side? This is a more problematic issue. In an earlier HTLit column I considered the characteristics of good hypertext and made the following observation:

The hallmark of worthwhile hypertext that everyone is likely to agree upon is that it offers a reading experience fundamentally different from reading print. Hypertextuality should not be mere decoration that could be easily stripped away to reveal a would-be piece of printed linear text beneath. [6]

Does this mean that a successful hypertext is by definition one that is fatally diminished when converted to

print? Conversely, if a hypertext can also work as a linear piece on the page, does this mean it is not a "true" hypertext? The hypertext fictions *I Have Said Nothing* by Jane Yellowlees Douglas [7] and *afternoon* by Michael Joyce [8] have been excerpted in a printed anthology. [9] Part of my own hypertext poem *A Life Set for Two* [10] has also been published in print. [11] Much is lost in these printed versions, which only hint at the hypertext reading experience. Geoff Ryman's hypertext novel *253* [12] was issued in print as *253: The Print Remix*. [13] Though the book was generally well received, some reviewers complained that it suffered from the loss of its interactive element. Chris Mitchell wrote of *253* that "where the electronic version seems alive and organic, the print version feels like an example of form obliterating content." [14] Rob Swigart's *Portal*, an interactive science-fiction novel, was released in print after its publication on disk. [15] In the printed novel, Swigart added a new character to assume the part played by the user in the interactive version.

A number of works have made the journey in the other direction, from print to hypertext. Stephanie Strickland's book of poetry *True North* began life as a collection conceived for print and then was turned into hypertext. [16] Her long poem *The Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot* was conceived as a hypertext from the beginning, according to the author, but it was written out in linear form on paper before being cast as hypertext. [17] Print and hypertext incarnations of both these works were published and have met with great success. Rob Swigart's *Down Time* was conceived as a sequence of short stories for print, and two of the stories appeared in printed magazines. [18] A hypertext version of *Down Time* is now forthcoming from Eastgate Systems. [19] In addition to these actual dual-medium implementations, there are many printed works often cited as "proto-hypertexts," such as Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, [20] that would undoubtedly make for fine interactive works.

Clearly some works can attain success in both print and hypertext, though certainly not every piece of writing will work well in both media. Just as when a novel is adapted for the stage or the screen, success depends both upon the nature of the material and upon the author's skill in tailoring the work to the peculiarities of the new medium where necessary. The works by Strickland and Swigart cited above are good examples of how linear writing can be enhanced by the logic of an interactive structure, as well as other electronic elements such as graphics and audio. They demonstrate very well how hypertext can be friend rather than foe to print. ♦

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