TIM PARKS

The Fighter

Essays

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To Bob Silvers and all his

Contents

Tales Told by a Computer

Among the many things the computer is supposed to change in our lives, one of the most profound, if the change were really to occur, is our experience of narrative. For the way we tell ourselves stories – our sense of the opening, development and closure of a plot – still largely determines the way we think of ourselves and of our progress, or otherwise, between cradle and grave.

We are not talking here about the e-book, the portable screen on which, page by page, traditional narrative can be read. That, in the end, offers only a more economic, if less attractive, way of giving us what we already have. Perhaps the only reasons to welcome the e-book are the possibility it offers to save on school texts, to travel light with a number of volumes in electronic form, and above all, for those like myself whose eyesight is not what it was, the possibility of choosing a larger type size than any printed book will offer.

No, the development that seeks to revolutionise the nature of storytelling is the so-called hypertext narrative, a product that, whether stored on CD or downloaded from the internet, can be experienced only through the computer, since access to the many choices and variations it offers can only be achieved through the use of keyboard and mouse. It cannot properly exist on the printed page. All over the world, websites and university courses promulgate and promote the phenomenon. Novelists of the stature of John Barth and Robert Coover have written enthusiastic essays and given lectures on how to become hypertext narrators. In an 'Endroduction' to Katherine Hayles's new book *Writing Machines*

the editor remarks: 'It's no wonder that one of the chief fetishes our society has produced is the book. But bibliomaniacal impulses are mutating in this world of multi-, trans- and re-mediation, and we need to establish new categories for describing the emotional and physical relationships readers have with what (and how) they read.'†

The hypertext narrative comes in so many forms that it is difficult to consider its potential with reference to just a few examples. All the same, two fundamental innovations immediately present themselves: the hypertext is free to mix the written word, whether narrative, poetry or essay, with sound, static images or even cinematic effects, and to deliver the text at whatever speed and in whatever form the author chooses. This is such a dramatic extension of the bookish tradition of illustration and illumination that in many cases the written part of the hypertext may lose much of its sense if separated from the dynamic within which it is presented.

However, by far the most revolutionary development of the hypertext has to do with the succession in which sections of written text are read. Hypertext dispenses with the linearity that invites us to proceed from page one of a book through to the end, front cover

† It is curious that Katherine Hayles's *Writing Machines*, which deals mainly with the 'materiality' (p.6), as she puts it, of the written text, seems unaware of the many writers across the centuries who have offered profound meditations on the physical aspects of text and language: Shakespeare, Swift (exhaustively), Browning, Joyce and Beckett, to name but an Anglo-Irish few. The omission of their reflections is emblematic of what we might call 'the provincialism of the contemporary' that dogs a great deal of criticism in the field. Though the range of sources may be geographically wide, it is chronologically restricted. 'My title, *Writing Machines*,' Hayles tells us, 'plays with the multiple ways in which writing and materiality come together' (p.26). She goes on to express her admiration for Milorad Pavic, Ursula Le Guin, Paul Zimmerman and Robert Coover, but seems unaware of Gulliver's encounter, almost 300 years ago, with the professor who invented the word machine on the fantastical island of Lagado. 'Roland Barthes', she tells us, 'uncannily anticipated electronic hypertext by associating text with dispersion, multiple authorship and RHIZOMATIC structure' (p.30). Published in 1704, Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* covered the same ground. If one wishes to disturb chronology, much of it could be read as a satire of recent literary enthusiasms. Hayles's demand at the opening of her second chapter, 'Why have we not heard more about materiality?' (p.19) thus rings hollow.

to back. Pages are not numbered and one cannot 'turn' them. Instead we are invited to use the computer mouse to click on any of a number of links ('hot' words or images in text on the computer screen or on the margin of it) to proceed to a (not *the*) following screen.

It is clear that with this innovation each reader's experience, at least in so far as the trajectory of plot or the accumulation of the work's reflections is concerned, will be different. He or she is obliged to construct a personal route through the text, and this largely at random and often without knowing how many pages there are, or whether there is still more to read or not. 'The traditional narrative time-line', wrote Coover, who makes it clear that he has a personal investment in 'fictions that challenge linearity', 'vanishes into a geographical landscape or exitless maze, with beginnings, middles and ends being no longer part of the immediate display.'

Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl, or a Modern Monster* is an example of a fairly early hypertext (1995) which, in every respect but linearity, remains fairly close to the print-bound novel; it has only a very few illustrations and no sound or cinematic effects. An opening image, comparable to a book cover, shows an old-fashioned, Da Vinci-style drawing of the human body, a woman's, above the title 'Patchwork Girl', by Mary Shelley and herself'. The reader is invited to click on various body parts or various areas of an anatomically represented brain. In each case he will see different sections of text varying from a brief sentence to a full, traditional page, many of which offer further links. What eventually emerges is a sequel, or addition, to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Taking her cue from the unhappy student's dilemma over whether or not he should make a mate for his monster, Jackson stitches together pieces of Shelley's work with convincing pages of pastiche to tell, for example, the stories of those whose corpses yield the body parts for the gruesome experiment and the story of the monstrous girl herself, her fugitive anonymous life as an outcast and freak and her erotic adventures. All of this in a decidedly nineteenth-century prose:

My left leg belonged to Jane, a nanny who harbored under her durable grey dresses and sensible undergarments a remembrance of a less sensible time: a tattoo of a ship and the legend, Come Back To Me. Nanny knew some stories that astonished her charges, and though the ship on her thigh blurred and grew faint and blue with distance, until it seemed that the currents must have long ago finished their work, undoing its planks one by one with unfailing patience, she always took the children to the wharf when word came that a ship was docking, and many a sailor greeted her by name.

My leg is always twitching, jumping, joggling. It wants to go places. It has had enough of waiting.

At every point the text insists on an analogy between the patchwork nature of the girl's body and the fragmented and non-linear hypertext, between her difficulty in establishing an identity from the many lives that have formed her and ours as we click back and forth looking for a thread to follow, often finding ourselves frustratingly confronted by a screen we have already read, unsure how to proceed or when to stop. In this regard, and like almost all hypertexts, *Patchwork Girl* seems obsessively conscious of its experimental medium, which it is eager to present in a positive light as a heightened form of realism, a metaphor for modern consciousness and, in this case, something peculiarly feminine, if not feminist. Digressions on the usually female task of quilting, for example, run alongside sections such as this:

Arranging these patched words in an electronic space I feel half blind, as if the entire text is within reach, but because of some myopic condition I am only familiar with from dreams, I can see only that part most immediately before me and have no sense of how that part relates to the rest. When I open a book, I know where I am, which is restful. My reading is spatial and even volumetric. I tell myself, I am a third of the way down a

rectangular solid, I am a quarter of the way down the page, I am here on the page. But where am I now? I am in here and a present moment that has no history and no expectations for the future.

More romantically the narrator announces:

I hop from stone to stone and an electronic river washes out my scent in the intervals. I am a discontinuous trace, a dotted line.

Or again:

The past I collect like snapshots in accordion-pleated plastic sleeves. Perhaps I'd like it better riding a strong steady flow, guaranteeing that if I boarded a Mississippi steamboat at x I would certainly pass through y before disembarking at z.

At this point one has to say that, as Twain has amply shown, if you do embark on the Mississippi at, for example, St Louis, you will inevitably pass through Cairo before reaching Memphis. Only if you fall asleep, as Huck and Tom do, do you risk missing the place where you want to stop. Not for nothing did Jackson speak of 'some myopic condition I am only familiar with from dreams'. The hypertext, perhaps, has a vocation above all for the dreamlike. The linear progression of time, the unyielding contour of the familiar landscape, these, whatever enthusiasms one may have for the postmodern world, are still our standard experience in the hours of wakefulness.

Turning back for a moment to the traditional book, it's worth recalling that nothing obliges us to read it from front to back. When we pick up anthologies, or essay collections, we frequently ignore the order in which the pieces are presented. Many like to read the last pages of a novel first.

The linearity of the book, of the page, or even the sentence, is thus only a convention, not inherent in the form, but something we choose to submit to, or not, every time we decide to read. In the 1960s and 1970s there were various experiments with loose-leaf novels whose chapters could be read in any order. They were soon abandoned. In his novel *Watt*, at the point of his main character's maximum derangement, Samuel Beckett begins to invert the order of the words in the sentence ('Day of most, night of part'), then the letters in the words ('"Geb nodrap," he said, "geb nodrap"'). No sooner has he reminded us that such things are possible, that nothing obliges him to write from left to right, top to bottom, than he returns to standard prose. Why?

However much the mind, on occasion and generally unprompted, may sense the nearness of distant moments, the closeness of remote places, thus challenging our normal experience of space and time, nevertheless it is evident that much of the pathos of our lives has to do with the stark simplicity of chronology: birth, youth, maturity, death. A novelist may choose to start *in medias res* or at the last gasp, every kind of mental resistance to the harsh facts of passing time may be recorded, but over the work's trajectory the reader expects a chronology to be reconstructed. Indeed, such a reconstruction from the tangle of memory and imagination can be considered a conquest, synonymous with the achievement of a certain knowledge and central to the moment of 'recognition' which concedes to the author a valuable wisdom about the world we share. That achievement is there in *Don Quixote* as it is there in *Ulysses*, or even, though in a more problematic fashion, in Beckett's trilogy. Borges, one of the writers whom hypertext practitioners most admire, once wrote an essay, 'A New Refutation of Time', which, having embarked on a most energetic denial of the reality of the combined enemies substance and time, concludes with a brutal volte-face: 'The world unfortunately is real; I unfortunately am Borges.'

Our willing submission, then, to the convention that one reads

a book from front to back, accepting whatever ordering of events the author chooses, partakes of an experience that we recognise from ordinary life: our inevitable submission to the unalterable succession of chronological events. The mind's frequent yearning for a freedom from linearity ('the tyranny of the line' Coover calls it), often expressed in the non-chronological ordering of events in the text, is thus held in fruitful tension with (indeed expressed through) the implacable forward movement of the numbered pages. A desire to be outside time, free from linearity, can only be expressed within time and the bounds of the line.

Criticism of the hypertext, still at a promotional stage, resists this acceptance of a fixed order of experience and a fixed narrative line; it champions instead the idea of choice, the notion of the reader's being involved, through interaction with the text links, in creating the story rather than submitting to it. A typical essay ('Telewriting' by Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen) concludes: 'Though the network is shared, the course each individual follows is different. Thus, no hypertext is the product of a single author who is its creative origin or heroic architect. To the contrary, in the hypertextual network, all authorship is joint authorship and all production is co-production. Every writer is a reader and all reading is writing.'

Two questions have to be asked here: is this really true of the hypertext? If it is true, is it desirable?

The answer to the first question is no. The traditional text was always 'interactive' up to a point, as the comments and glosses on ancient manuscripts suggest. I can (and do!) write in the margin, express my objections or admiration. I can come back years later and wonder in disbelief that I ever thought that way. Or I can read someone else's reactions and find that he has a totally different view of the story as joint authorship.

In the hypertext, this simple form of engagement is denied me. I cannot scribble on the page. In compensation, when I have finished

reading a page I can, or must, choose between a limited number of alternatives to proceed. Certainly it is unlikely that I will read the text in exactly the same order as anyone else. But to say that this makes me a co-writer, to the same extent as the author who prepared the texts and decided what links would be available to me, where and when, is nonsense. I have written nothing. As I choose where to click I have no more power and perhaps less intuition than the hapless tourist lost in Hampton Court maze.

But even if we were to invent a medium that was truly 'interactive' – and there are hypertexts to which readers, or co-authors, can make contributions – a medium where there was (the political rhetoric behind the quotation above is clear enough) a 'democratic' equality between author and reader, or rather, between all those involved, would this be desirable? I have written ten novels to date. I have worked hard to keep them distinct. Yet I am bound to acknowledge that one way or another they tend to express the same preoccupations. When I read another's work it is to confront a different vision from my own, not to steer what I am reading to all-too-familiar destinations. If every reading were my own writing, the world would become dangerously solipsistic.

It is not hard to imagine Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* being presented as a printed novel. Something would certainly be lost, but a great deal could be gained. Other hypertext narratives, however, have committed themselves more deeply to the medium, seeking a greater distance from the printed book. Stuart Moulthrop's *Hegirascope, or What If The Word Still Won't Be Still* presents a series of pages, most with about 100–200 words of text, and each containing a fragment of narrative, usually comic or grotesque, or some satirical comment on the world. Most pages have four links, two in the left margin and two in the right, often with ironic invitations: the link 'Tired' on one side of the page, for example, is balanced by a link 'Wired' on the other. If the reader fails to click on a link within thirty seconds, then the choice of the next page

is taken out of his hands and the screen is 'refreshed' with a new text, often with no immediately evident relationship to what has come before. Since I am a slow reader, this frequently occurs before I have finished the page in front of me. Differently coloured texts and backgrounds link different themes and story lines. Here is an example:

TIRED: LINKS . . . WIRED: LINKS

Tired

Those masters of conception at *Wired* have done it again. The people who brought you the 500 Channel Future, the Great Web Wipeout, and the Big Switch to Push this month announce their latest paradigm shift. In a lead article beginning on the back cover of the current issue, senior editors Gary Wolf, Kevin Kelly, and Greg Norman announce a bold change of direction. With high-level interest in information Wired technologies fading fast, *Wired* reinvents itself as a golf magazine.

Change

'This is really an organic evolution,' write the editors, 'since golf is the first and highest form of Green virtual reality. Further, we believe this game is a great metaphor for all technologies and most life experiences. Are you on the green?'

Stock in Wired Ventures, Inc. rose sharply after its initial public offering last week, up 1.15 to close at 39.52. 'I have seen the future,' said founder Louis Rosetto from the back nine at Augusta, 'now I need to work on my handicap.'

Hegirascope isn't without its fun. A labyrinth is created in which the reader seeks to orient himself. It becomes clear that if one of

the challenges of narrative is not to appear contrived, but to reflect within the medium a fresh awareness of what is perceived as a meaningless and directionless world without, then the hypertext narrative is admirably equipped to do that. This is no doubt what the enthusiasts mean when they speak of having overcome the limitations of the traditional text.

The downside of this development is that the form cannot deliver any sense of a satisfying ending. Indeed the very desirability of endings is questioned. One is not easily sure whether one has finished *Hegirascope* or not, so that the biggest decision the reader finally makes is not which links to click, but when to stop reading and clicking altogether. There comes a point, that is, where you begin to doubt whether tracking down what fragments may remain will add a great deal to the overall experience. At this point you appreciate that one of the most important things the standard book declares about itself, from the moment we pick it up, and then throughout our dealings with it, is its length. The reader can pace himself. The introduction to *Hegirascope* tells us that there are '175 pages traversed by 700 links', but I soon lost count of how many I had read. Moulthrop has already updated the work once, adding new pages, and he may well do so again.

While the earlier hypertexts still contained a large volume of words and possible stories, more recent productions tend to be shorter, with a more ambitious mixing of sound, image and text. Talan Memmott introduces his work *Lolli's Apartment* thus:

Lolli's Apartment is an experiment in the ruination of contexts and the reconstruction of this ruin; or, the gathering of its fragments. The piece brings together a selective yet varied set of resources. The first operation in such a project is the construction of something that can be ruined. In this case, the initial construction is an analect of texts and contexts.

Minoan Architecture and cult practices, Paul Klee's Twittering

Machine, Friedrich Nietzsche's critiques of women and the Dionysian, Orphic hymns . . . All of these are touched upon in the piece.

Some references are obvious — such as, the use of an excerpt from the floor plan of the Knossos Labyrinth as an architectural model for the navigation through Lolli's Apartment, and the hero's name being Fredrick Nietzsche (an impostor professor).

Readers, or users, of this hypertext will judge for themselves, as they click about the rather primitive maze Memmott has created, deciphering texts that mix the portentous and the deflationary, whether there isn't a serious gap here between the promise of all this cultural reference and the effect achieved. A typical fragment reads thus:

The pie-in-the-sky must die . . . Its fumes, its rays, its parts and pieces can no longer be taken seriously . . . I can't submit to hope. We, the hopeless abandon future-progress for technologies closer to the dirt . . . A tectonic model that limits Institutions to the elemental, to their integration with the matter that surrounds them. The false, rather, the pretend futures of the Sophomore well-up and wither. The faith in ends, a graduation, a certified future, erode into disarray, depart and open, forming legions of xenologically ordered systems. This is where our association begins.

In the end (the expression still seems to have its uses), however short the written texts in the overall production, and however ingeniously those texts are mixed with other elements, still the quality of the writing and of whatever the author has to say through it remains of vital importance to our enjoyment of the whole. For all his moments of playfulness, Memmott does not score highly here.

In line with the notion that hypertext narrative is a collective rather than individual effort, many texts are presented anonymously. The

illustrated text *Berceuse*, for example, offers painterly images, New Age music and snatches of lyrical text within which links are indicated by differently coloured words. Float the cursor over the link and, even before you click, a landscape within the landscape comes into view, while the music and text change. 'A lilac dusk stretched across a summer sky' announces one text. 'We ate golden plums, collecting their stones in the grass beneath our naked feet.' Above an orange hillside dominated by a giant, Dalí-like plum, a banner, or perhaps caption, moves from right to left announcing: 'I choked on an Olive in the kitchen there was Honey in a geometric jar.' Meantime the screen glows, the music keens.

Of such and similar exercises, the critic Stephanie Strickland remarks that they push 'at the edges of awareness by explicitly incorporating peripheral attention into the act of reading'. This is an idea that requires consideration. The time has come to ask why all these hypertexts, even when intriguing and entertaining, ultimately disappoint. Perhaps in the end their most precious function will turn out to be that of inviting us to consider why the convention of the traditional narrative in linear form has held for so long and will most likely continue to do so.

Towards the end of the *Odyssey*, when Helen and Menelaus are safely, scandalously, back home, they are surprised one evening by the arrival of Telemachus. All three are eager to talk about Troy. It is the one great experience of their lives. But it is too painful. The young man's father, Odysseus, is missing presumed dead. Helen and Menelaus would have to reflect on her betrayals, his weakness. So Helen leaves the room and returns with some drugged wine. This is a drug, Homer tells us, that would allow you to talk of your brother's death with a smile on your face. The threesome drink and spend a happy evening recovering all that was most awful and exciting in their lives, to wake the following morning refreshed.

What is the drug that narrative offers which allows us to pass through the burning Troy and escape unscathed? For this is the

quality of the great and important narrative, that we can take pleasure in confronting all that in the normal way provokes the greatest unease. The Indians of the Vedic period believed that metre could provide the necessary protection: 'So as not to be hurt', says the Taittirīya Samhita of the priest, 'before coming near the fire he wraps himself in the metres.' The advice is more practical than it may appear. How did Dante pass through the inferno after all, if not with ancient Rome's most able poet as his guide and the fiercely regular chime of the terza rima to keep things moving? 'The many people and their ghastly wounds did so intoxicate my eyes that I was moved to linger there and weep' says the pilgrim in the inferno. But Virgil, master of the rhythmic word, hurries the traveller on: 'What are you staring at . . . the time we are allotted soon expires and there is more to see.'

By mixing the rhythmic word with other distracting effects, is the hypertext intensifying or diluting the artist's capacity to enchant, to allow us access to the most powerful experiences while safely wrapped in his metres, in the propulsive forward movement of his narrative? Our engagement with the written word, during which the eye becomes a conduit for sound and rhythm, activating other senses beyond the visual, dulling external apprehensions, inviting immersion, is not likely to be enhanced by elements that 'explicitly incorporat[e] peripheral attention'. Substituting our immediate environment with an imagined world, the written text repels intrusion. During our most intense reading we are hardly aware of turning the pages, or of the sounds in distant rooms. The situation is difficult to recreate when the mind is halted by a troubled choice between four links. Perhaps not for nothing, most hypertexts are either diffusely oneiric, or corrosively satirical.

Within a couple of decades of its invention the motion picture had achieved heights it would never surpass. Less remarkable conceptually than the word, the sequence of silent images in a darkened room nevertheless very rapidly reproduced the antique combination

of narrative content within a rhythmic frame. Those who have seen Murnau's *Sunrise*, Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, as those who have read the *Iliad*, will be aware that there is no progress in art. The hypertext by contrast, though it has been around for perhaps twenty years now and has enjoyed the benefit of very rapid technical developments, and much attention from the more avant-garde universities, has not enjoyed the same flowering.

Intriguingly, however, there are practitioners who have now dropped the rhetoric of choice that grew up around the use of the hyperlink and are following a different line. Felix Jung's hypertext poems are curious in this respect. A sonnet appears on the screen at a slow, measured speed imposed by the writer and with an abrupt, even aggressive use of images. The frame around the text is headed with a traditional menu bar, so that the space looks exactly like any screen we are used to working on. Yet try as we might, we find it impossible to introduce the cursor into the text space or in any way interact with it. Rather, the cursor is taken out of our control, as if someone had taken the pen from your hand, and begins to move of its own accord, clicking and changing and generating the text and its images before our eyes.

At this point we are even more passive than before the printed page. I quote below a poem entitled 'Cruelty'. The reader will not, I think, find it difficult to imagine the graphics Felix Jung uses to reinforce his point, which, it has to be said, is clear enough when the poem appears on its own, bereft of illustrations. Indeed, it can be read like any sonnet written on any page 400 or 500 years ago. To date it is the best criticism I have seen of the aesthetics of the hypertext narrative.

Cruelty

I need to draw the line for you and me:
a poem is not Democracy. You are
my hands, you serve and wait. You're something I

manipulate. Let me be clear on this.
I paint a tree and, on the ground, a white
and perfect egg that's fallen (now you
cry). I paint a snake (and here you cringe).

But now that I am painting you, you flinch
because you know this room. Your father (whom
you never knew) is here as well, despite
his gravestone and the years. You try to kiss

his hand, but I erase your lips, his eyes –
I leave the rest. Get mad. Get in your car
and leave. All poems, at heart, are tyranny.