

# Aalborg University Esbjerg Computer Science Department

## ACM Hypertext '99 Doctoral Consortium Final Report

### Technical Report AUE-CS-99-03

*Peter J. Nürnberg, editor*

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## 2 NARRATIVE, AESTHETICS, AND READERSHIP

There were three position statements presented at the doctoral consortium meeting in the session on narrative, aesthetics, and readership.

The first position statement presented in this session is entitled "The HyLink Framework: a study of link performance in hypertext fiction" by Johanna Bucur.

The second position statement presented in this session is entitled "'Creamus, ergo sumus': towards a multimedia aesthetics" by Christiane Heibach. Christiane studied German literature, philosophy, and history in Bamberg, Germany, Paris, France, and Heidelberg, Germany. After her M.A. degree, she worked as a PR Assistant for a publishing house. Since 1996, she has been working on her doctoral thesis on literature and art projects in the internet. The paper published here is a revised copy of the paper presented at the doctoral consortium meeting.

The third position statement presented in this session is entitled "Authors, readers, and texts - digital fiction in the context of contemporary literary theory" by Anja Rau. Anja, born 1970, has finished her dissertation on the position of authors and readers in digital fiction. She holds a First State Exam for teaching English and German from Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz. Other fields of study include Women-/Gender-Studies, Modernism, and the Middle Ages. In the course of her studies, she spent one semester at Southampton University, UK, and one semester at Middlebury College, Vermont, USA. Currently, she teaches a course on "Women, Cyborgs, and Other Fictions" at Mainz University. (See also <http://www.uni-mainz.de/~raua000>.) The paper published here is a revised copy of the paper presented at the doctoral consortium meeting.

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## THE HyLink FRAMEWORK: A STUDY OF LINK PERFORMANCE IN HYPERTEXT FICTION

*Johanna Bucur*  
*Chair of English Literature and Cultural Studies*  
*University of Passau*  
*D-94030 Passau, Germany*  
*bucur@fmi.uni-passau.de*

**Keywords:** hyperfiction, narrative grammar, link semantics, dynamics

### 1 Introduction

- [5] Landow, George P. (ed.). 1994. *Hyper/Text/Theory*. John Hopkins University Press, London.
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- [8] Moulthrop, Stuart. 1995. Traveling in the breakdown lane: a principle of resistance for hypertext. *Mosaic* 28(4), 55-77. <http://raven.ubalt.edu/staff/moulthrop/essays/breakdown.html>.
- [9] Snyder, Ilana (ed.). 1998. *Page to Screen. Taking Literacy into the Electronic Era*. Routledge, London.

### **Mentioned hyperfictions**

- Jackson, Shelley. 1995. *Patchwork Girl*. Eastgate, Cambridge, MA.
- Joyce, Michael. 1990. *Afternoon - a Story*. Eastgate, Cambridge, MA.
- Moulthrop, Stuart. 1991. *Victory Garden*. Eastgate, Cambridge, MA.

### **Mentioned Web-projects**

- BEAST by Jacques Servin, <http://home.earthlink.net/~jservin/Beast/>.
- Can You See Me Through the Computer by Juliet Martin, <http://www2.sva.edu/threads/juliet/seeme/index.html>.
- Conversation with Angels, created by Meetfactory, <http://angels.kiasma.fng.fi/index.html>.
- Grammatron by Mark America, <http://www.grammatron.com/index2.html>.
- WaxWeb by David Blair, <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/wax/>.

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## **AUTHORS, READERS, AND TEXTS - DIGITAL FICTION IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY**

*Anja Rau*  
*Department of English/American Studies*  
*Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz*  
*Elsa-Brandstrom-Str. 10/10114*  
*55124 Mainz, Germany*  
*raua000@mail.uni-mainz.de*

### **Abstract**

Analyses of hyperfiction need to draw clear distinctions between fictional vs. non-fictional and online vs. offline texts; hypertext should be considered as a format among others; the relation of the reading environment to the "text itself" is not yet sufficiently attended to. Introducing these concepts into my analysis, I examine the relation of author, reader, and text in hyperfiction and come to the conclusion that what is generally called "interactive fiction" cannot create an active reader-author without the help of further textual strategies already employed in paper-fiction.

**Keywords:** digital literature, hyperfiction, computer games, authorship, readership

## Position statement

My doctoral dissertation is concerned with digital fiction in the context of the relationship between author, reader, and text as a key-issue of contemporary literary theory. Whereas hypertext theory in general proposes the introduction of a wreader (G. P. Landow) into the traditional author-reader-text triangle, existing hypertext fiction is still very much determined by the authors' plottings and plannings. I hold that hypertext as a format and digital fiction as a genre have reached a point where studies with a tighter focus and more thorough analyses of single texts are called for (as opposed to all-encompassing works like those of G. P. Landow, M. Joyce, E. J. Aarseth, J. H. Murray, J. D. Bolter, etc., that grant only little room to the exploration of single aspects and titles).

In addition to this, one of the drawbacks of existing hypertext theory is its apparent unwillingness to distinguish consistently between fictional vs. non-fictional and online vs. offline hypertext. Findings that hold true for networked information-hypertext are often mapped onto offline stand-alone fictions; and, due to the general lack of in-depth analyses, the clashes and inconsistencies do not become immediately apparent. Thus, Michael Joyce may admit (intermittently) that the reader of hyperfiction is not really a co-creator but the overall view that is supported and perpetuated by hypertext-theory is that hypertext (like Barthes' writerly text) turns the reader from consumer into producer.

For the analysis of digital fiction, I propose three approaches not yet realized in hyperfiction theory: the broadening of the term hyperfiction to include "traditional" (Storyspace(r) and HyperCard(r)) hyperfiction as well as narrative Computer Games; the addition of format to the traditional categories of form and content; and the recognition of the shell (see below) as textual element.

There is, as yet, no established definition of hyperfiction or digital literature. I propose the synonyms digital literature and digital fiction as working terminology pending the consolidation of this divergent and still growing genre. The digital environment (as opposed to paper and the codex) with its entailments (e.g., permutability of text, interactivity, networkability, identical copies) is vital for the shape this new kind of text takes. Genuine hypertext is so far only a subgenre whose distinctive features can be and are emulated by non-hypertext environments. On a more basic level, all digital texts, except for imitations of paper texts, have the same architecture: a database of textblocks (which may include images and sounds) and a set of rules that work on the database and produce apparently continuous text. The inclusion of non-typical hypertexts like (narrative) Adventure Games not only broadens the text-base, but also offers a wider range of features currently in use.

The contributions of hyper to text have been widely applauded. However, the hyper-element has never been categorized in a way to make it graspable as one component among others (namely form and content) that are formative for a text. The few actual interpretations of hyperfictions that have been published over the past years usually fail to focus on aspects of the text other than its hypertextuality. Categorizing hypertext as one of two currently possible formats (the other being paper or codex-form) makes it possible to view the hypertextuality of a text in the relation to its content and its literary/poetic form. For example, instead of calling hypertext "inherently metatextual" (because the link is at the same time part of the text and part of a metatext and because the reader of a hypertext has to be able to read the digital environment - which I call "shell" - as well), one should examine in how far the format hypertext is mirrored by the content or the style of a text.

The shell of a digital text may become less apparent as a "foreign body" as we get used to reading and writing with the computer. But, even allowing for a certain novelty factor, the environment of a digital text differs significantly from that of a paper text. The typology of paratexts (as described by Genette) may be transferred 1:1 onto the computer, but a digital text also has specific paratexts unknown to the codex: packing, package inserts, ReadMeFirsts, installation guides, Help-menus, toggles and buttons, link-structures, etc. These are texts (or metatexts) that, in the context of digital text, cannot be separated from a transcendental notion of the text as such. Without them, the digital text can neither be read nor exist at all. I see a need to develop a way of reading digital paratexts on top of and in relation to digital texts.

My analyses currently suggest that instead of taking the author out of the text, hypertext reintroduces the author and his (more often than her) authority back into his writings. The agency or co-creativity that hypertext claims to grant to the reader-become-author does not equal the original creativity and scope of influence of a text's primary author. The reader is given only surface freedom that is generally counteracted by the text's workings (what S. Moulthrop calls robotic fiction). Only in a few cases have I read the actual authority of interactive texts reflected and refuted on the level of content.

Unlike other recent publications on digital fiction (cf. Espen J. Aarseth or Janet H. Murray), I do not try to cover a diachronic range of primary texts. Digital fiction is a relatively young genre, but in the short time of its development, the technology underlying (and heavily influencing!) these texts has changed considerably. In those cases where the format is really of some importance to the text, the different technological bases of the format must not go unacknowledged. Analyses that use a diachronic selection of texts have to (or still do) interpret inherently different subgenres on equal grounds. My current textbase comprises about 18 Computer Games and 13 hyperfictions, most of them from the mid- and late 1990s.

My thesis project is currently in the second of the three years usually allotted to dissertation projects in Germany. So far, I have reviewed the theory up to date, analyzed the primary sources, made an elaborate draft of the text entire, and have finished writing about half of it. I hope that participation in the doctoral consortium will help me shape my final conclusions as well as add some insights into the more technical aspects of hypertext writing. By the time Hypertext '99 takes place, my remaining task will be to update the theoretical background of my fast-developing subject. To this, too, I hope my attendance at the conference will contribute.

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### **3 FINDING HYPERTEXT IN PRINT**

There were three position statements presented at the doctoral consortium meeting in the session on finding hypertext in print.

The first position statement presented in this session is entitled "#: Ezra Pound, The Cantos, and hypertext" by William Cole. William Cole is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Georgia specializing in twentieth century literature and hypertext theory. He is currently teaching at Morehead State University in Kentucky.

The second position statement presented in this session is entitled "Jorge Luis Borges: a forerunner of the technology of the new millennium" by Perla Sassón-Henry. Perla hopes to complete her Doctoral Degree in Humanistic Studies by December 1999. Her areas of interest are Literature and Technology as well as the use of technology for foreign language instruction. She is currently an assistant professor at Castleton State College, Vermont, USA. The paper published here is a revised copy of the paper presented at the doctoral consortium meeting.

The third position statement presented in this session is entitled "The process of reading literary prose: a hypertext edition of James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" by Susana Pajares Tosca.

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### **#: EZRA POUND, THE CANTOS, AND HYPERTEXT**

*William Cole*  
*Department of English, University of Georgia*  
*UPO 626, 150 University Blvd.*  
*Morehead, KY 40351-1689 USA*  
*wi.cole@morehead-st.edu*