Towards the Recognition of the Shell as an Integral Part of the Digital Text

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ABSTRACT
Although the theory of hypertext fiction does not regard the Shell as a text, writers of digital fiction, have long started to blur the boundaries between the Reader and the "main" text. Both interpreters of (fictional) hypertexts and programmers of hypertext-environments need to acknowledge this fact in order to accomodate current writing practices.

KEYWORDS: digital literature, hyperfiction, computer games, metatext, paratext

TEXT AND CARRIER
In the rare cases where it considers the carriers and supplements of a digital text at all, the theory of literary writing in hypertext suggests that the reading environment (the "Reader") constitutes a metatext to the main text. In this view, the Reader is a text that has to be read or deciphered bevor the "actual" text can be read. Hypertext reading is supposed to be meta-reading because the physical structure of the text has to be read along with the text. While this view stretches the definition of the term "metatext", it pays to read the surroundings of the digital text *as texts*.

SOFTWARE- VERSUS HARDWARE-APPROACH
A text in a digital environment cannot exist without embedding in representations of a paper-text's material carrier (unless the text comes as a batch programm that scrolls down in front of the readers' eyes much like a video-film). Even non-hypertextual, strictly linear, read-only writing has to offer the reader a way to "turn the page" - be it a scrollbar or back/forward-buttons. Accordingly, more sophisticated interactions with the text, like those offered by hypertext, call for a more sophisticated reading environment. These environments are usually called "Readers". Offline digital hyperfiction (and I use this term in its broadest possible meaning) also usually comes with a number of supporting materials, both digital and paper-based. The information contained in

these texts is vital to and often also part of the "main" text presented within the Reader. Interpretations of digital fiction often dismiss the Shell (the Reader and the additional texts) as external to the text and secondary to their analyses. However, many writers of hyperfiction blurr the boundaries of "main" and "subsidiary" text.

The up-and-coming "electronic book" that loads different texts into one and the same piece of hardware may make software-Readers dispensable. This, however, would make necessary the establishment of a standard in which all texts destined for a certain machine would have to be marked up, so that a) a text created for use on one system would be illegible on other systems that do not conform to these standards, and b) every new approach to textuality (like the step from text to hypertext) would call for new hardware. In order to keep hypertext systems flexible, designers will probably stick with the Reader-approach instead of hardwiring their solutions.

METATEXT OR PARATEXT
The international software market has established certain conventions of interface design that allow for "intuitive understanding". Still, the buttons and icons have to be "read", deciphered and understood before the "actual" text can be read. In the case of hypertext, links can hardly be separated from the text-to-be-read. Like any other sign in a text, a link signifies. However, as Rainer Kuhlen has pointed out, a link, unlike other semiotic signs, points to an actual entity, not merely referring to it, but at the same time realizing it. [1] Furthermore, hypertext asks the reader to activate links according to patterns of meaning the reader establishes or retraces within the text. Thus, the reader reads the text of the textblocks, but she also reads the text of the link-structure and assembles the final text from both of them, while the link-structure describes the text on a level besides that of content. In this sense, the text-informing structure of a digital text and its reading environment form the inherent metatext of every digital text.

However, Readers in general do not only carry navigation-tools, but other texts, much like the paratexts Gérard Genette describes for paper text [2]. While a metatext is a text (within a text) that describes the "main" text, paratexts are all those texts "outside" a text that refer and belong to this text - forewords, reviews, advertisements, interviews. For

digital texts, these inculde Help-Files, Read Me Firsts, Installation Guides and other documents, both in digital form and on paper. In some cases, the digital paratext may correspond immediately to a paratext on paper.

THE SHELL

Instead of disregarding the paper and digital supplements of digital texts (as, for example, Espen Aarseth does in *Cybertext* [3]), I propose to include both the Reader (and the information contained in it) and the additional materials in a category I call "Shell". The importance of the Shell for the interpretation of digital fictional text, then, derives from the fact that the information contained in it is not always subsidiary to the "main" text. Rather, the lines between text and Shell blurr in hypertext and this shifting of boundaries is employed as a textual strategy by hyperficion authors.

SHIFTS IN HYPERFICTIONS

Afternoon - Overlapping Contents

Michael Joyce's hyperfiction classic *Afternoon - A Story* [4], for example, comes with a booklet containing, among other pieces of information, installation and navigation guidelines. This information appears again in the "main" text, branching off from the starting page on equal grounds with the "story". In fact, from the eight links leaving "start" only two lead directly into the story, one yields to critical thoughts about hypertext and "help" information and the rest call up extended copyright information, yet another paratext that is not entirely separable from the "main" text in the digital format.

Afternoon comes with the rather basic Storyspace® *Page Reader* that does not include a palette, toolbar or full-fledged menu where a help function could have been implemented. There are other hyperfictions, like Carolyn Guyer's *Quibbling* [5], that pick up the "help"-content in the digital paratext as well. Joyce's *Afternoon* is unique in that the "help"-branch is not a single, discrete path that does, in the end, lead back into the "main" text. The help-path is itself made out of several branches and, more importantly, single nodes from this path turn up later on, then appearing as part of the "main" text. Thus, what is commonly quite easily discernible as a paratext (the help-feature) now fuses with the text and loses its extratextual status.

Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse - Flexible Functions

Similar effects can be imagined for functional parts of the *reader* (like the print function) or the link-structure which, in the case of Adventure Games on the computer, is not only an underlying grid, but also part of the story told. Therefore, even the text of the metatext should not only be read as an outside text that requires a certain technical literacy and frames the "main" text, but as an integral part of the "main" text. There are indeed texts, like John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* [6], that reflect this relation of text and para-/metatext in a way that turns the "actual" text into a metatext of the paratext. McDaid works with error-messages that appear on clicking "help"- or "print"-buttons, but also, in one case, on following an unsuspicious link. McDaid shifts text-levels (main, meta, para) and makes this

blurring of boundaries part of the story he has to tell.

Discworld - Shifting Locations

The Adventure Game *Discworld* [7], for example, shifts not only the content or the function, but the physical location of one it its paratexts into the "main" text. The *Luggage* is a character from Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*-novels the computer game series is based on. Its capability to carry items comes in handy in the context of the computer game: most Adventure Games base their riddles on finding and combining objects. Once found, the objects are stored in an inventory until they can be used. This inventory is conventionally located in the menu or toolbar. In the *Discworld* series, however, it is fused with the character *Luggage*.

This is not only an elegant solution for the interface (the player no longer has to leave the game-window in order to access stored obejcts). It also combines the play-level with the settings-level in a way that could be made significant for the game. *Discworld* does not mirror the text/carrier-shift on the level of story. One could, however, imagine games that do - the absence of actual realizations does not deny the possibilities of collapsing tools and narration.

THE SHELL AS TEXT

Obviously, the concept of the "inherent metatext" describes only part of the effect the reading environment has for the digital text. The concept of the para- and also the metatext as texts of their own and the recognition of the importance these contexts bear for the "main" text may be better suited to do justice to the digital text. Digital (and hyper-)fiction writing no longer adhers to the clear distinction between "content"-text and carrier and this practice, as it establishes itself, may well spread to information hypertext writing. Interpreters of digital fiction do well to include the Shell into their analyses. And for designers of hypertext systems, the awareness that especially the Reader is used in certain non-default ways may be useful to meet the needs of those working with their systems, writers and readers alike.

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