

Wreader's Digest - How To Appreciate Hyperfiction

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Abstract

Compared to its age - or youth - hyperfiction is a rather well-theorized genre. Hyperfiction-criticism either praises its subject as evolved print-text and better realization of contemporary literary theory - or deplore its - allegedly - low literary quality. What is missing, however, are in-depth readings of digital fiction that deemphasize theory and try to appreciate this new genre for what it has to offer.

In this "paper", I will read two hyperfictions that are not among the two or three canonized texts that are relatively well-known and often-quoted. Both John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* and Sarah Smith's *King of Space* deal with central issues of hypertext-theory - in content as well as formally. They are about agency and sense-making, ironically deconstructing mainstream theory's claims that digital, hyperlinked texts activate readers into a de-facto author-position. They are also representations of contemporary life that may be difficult to read at first but also make strangely adequate and enjoyable texts for today's readers.

On Hyperfiction

A comparatively budding genre in the 1990s, today hyperfiction seems to be receding into the classical antiquity-department of the study (and perusal) of digital literature - much like the textadventure before it. On the other hand, hyperfictions are the first instances of literature in the digital medium to make it into contemporary anthologies and grad-school text"books" (for lack of a better expression ...). Still, with the increased availability of broadband internet access in the home and aggressive marketing of CD-ROMs and online entertainment, digital literature becomes more and more multimedial, leaving text-based specimens to look like experiments, once needed to pave the way but now outdated. In the wake of our culture going multimedia, however, there is a point in turning back to take a look at the siblings of *Afternoon* - published in 1987 and considered to be the "granddaddy" of hyperfictions - for what they can tell us about reading and writing in digital space, for what they can tell us about our lives, too, and also for the pleasure of reading them.

Digital fiction - and especially hyperfiction as one of its earliest specimen - is a well-theorized genre - some might say over-theorized, primarily if put in relation to its literary merits.(1) Central among these approaches is the idea of hyperfiction as embodiment of literary theories of the active reader (2), as in Barthes' concept of the *readerly* and *writerly* text. Hypertext (fictional or non-fictional) is said to activate the reader who has to realize the text in reading it. In this way, hypertextual fiction is held to be more enjoyable than a linear novel that imposes an author's intended meaning on the reader. In fact, hyperfiction is often placed in a teleological context as the logical and best continuation of the key issues of postmodern (literary) theory.

But this discourse of progress, of a better or more adequate realization of contemporary theory, of the evolution of the text from restrictive, closed print to flexible, open hypertext, puts unnecessary pressure on the digital text (as well as its reader). When we read hyperfiction hoping to find the better text, we may not only be disappointed by the (quite expected) shortcomings of a young and fledgling genre, we're also likely to miss its achievements and its beauty. This is not to say that thoroughly theorized hyperfiction-criticism should be put on ice until the genre has grown up,(3) but what both the genre and its theoretical contextualization need are more thorough readings that sound its depths and show the print-schooled reader how to appreciate this unfamiliar text-form.

Appreciation

Appreciating someone else's views and encodings of these views is not about looking to an approved sense-maker for a guided tour of one's own life. Sven Birkerts, whose *Gutenberg Elegies* are almost canonical in hypertext theory, for example, reads for meaning, the author's intended meaning: "The fictional world is a world with a sponsoring god [...]. The author's reality is meaningful - an intended entity - and we soak it up right along with the story line. [...] Reading created in me the awareness that life could be lived and known as a unified whole [...]. Without that faith, that sense of imminent resolution, the events of the day-to-day would be like some vast assortment of colored beads without a string to hold them together." Multiple points of view, diversity, are not for Birkerts. He knows the author must have deposited meaning somewhere and now the reader is here to find it and "soak it up". "[B]oth structuralism and deconstruction", Birkerts argues, are to be grasped as the inevitable intellectual accompaniment to the fragmentation and collapse of formerly coherent systems in the face of the communications revolution. ... [T]he effects of interactive programs on users sound a good deal like the symptoms of postmodernism. And [...] this recent cultural aesthetic [...] may be a consequence of a larger transformation of sensibility by information-processing technologies."

The point of appreciation, however, is not the desire to live by someone else's word, but to appreciate their view of the world as well as the way they express it. Active reading as recommended by hypertext-theory, on the other hand, is not about abandoning the desire or the habit to live by someone else's word, for the liberated feel of drawing from a text whatever one wishes to find in it.(4) The contemporary approach of reading without imagining a "sponsoring god" (5) behind the text can very well go along with an appreciation of the author's/writer's view of the world as well as the way they express it. Deciding to sit back and appreciate someone else's writing does not make me a "passive", merely consuming reader. And why should everybody want or have to be a writer in the first place? Most of the time, writing is merely damn hard work. I can't remember when I last grabbed the keyboard and typed a few sentences for the sheer joy of seeing the words roll out. But it was only yesterday that I read the first few lines of *Mrs Dalloway*, amazed, as if it had been the first time, by Woolf's skill and ease: The way she, in only a few sentences, rolls the whole book into a ball to let it slowly unfold from there.

Perhaps it is impossible to truly appreciate what someone else has written without having experienced what it means to write oneself - but that has nothing to do with *readerly* or *writerly* texts, with passive or active readers. A non-cook can enjoy good food without being able to fully appreciate the craft behind it; a non-writer can enjoy a good piece of text. It is possible to

claim, quite self-righteously, that without the experience of writing, one cannot adequately appreciate what someone else has written, but for both writers and non-writers it is permissible to *decide* that what they want to do right now is not to write but to enjoy someone else's writing.

Alain de Botton's *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, for example, is a pleasure to read because it not only makes me appreciate de Botton's writing but also that of Marcel Proust. It lets me participate in another's appreciation of someone's texts, which makes me feel immediately better about doing this sort of thing myself. De Botton's writing displays an outlook on life that seems to be - across gaps of gender and culture - remarkably compatible with mine. I enjoy reading his renderings of situations I've known and some that are not part of my active experience. However, I do not only appreciate *what* he writes (although *How Proust* actually and embarrassingly made me reevaluate choices I'd made in real life and prompted a move or two), but also *how* he puts it. In de Botton's words *apropos* of Proust's relation to Ruskin:

"Ruskin had expressed things which Proust might have felt himself, but could not have articulated on his own; in Ruskin, he found experiences which he had never been more than semi-conscious of, raised and beautifully assembled in language."

The author does not *prescribe* a view of the world or an approach to my life, but by applying the text (or parts of it that touch me) to my life, I can become aware of experiences and facets and of ways to read them that had hitherto been unreachable, I can also be encouraged to continue to perceive the world in ways that I have used before.

Hyperfiction Now

Hypertext (and fiction-writing in hypertext) works with an approach to life, reality and the representation of these concepts that clicks with what can, in a sweeping approximation, be called a postmodern view of this world - small surprise, as the "inventors" of hyperfiction have, themselves, been shaped to no small degree by a traditional education in postmodern literature and theory and the world around them. A unified outlook on reality, a single perspective, a linear setup, a meaningful plot, a logical conclusion, a proper end are nice and quite consoling to have in a story. The way John Irving, in the very last pages of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, weaves the surfeit of plotlines and seemingly loose ends into one perfect whole can be just the right reading for a certain mood. But fictions/factions that do or try to do without these concepts are uncannily adequate for describing life as most people today experience it on most days - ruptured, fractured, with no well-worn plot to catch them. Reading an Auster or Borges or Gustafsson may not provide the big answer to the ultimate question, but these texts offer a sense of recognition, a small not-quite-a-narrative that is better suited to describe contemporary experience than a big old beginning-middle-end novel. Readers can enjoy and appreciate the way these authors encode the world we live in in words that make sense to us (even if this sense is the assertion of ultimate senselessness). The same goes for hyperfiction.

The active, in control reader-become-writer, the *wreader*, is a welcome quest of hypertext. Allegedly, with a hypertext, the reader has every possibility to shape the text after his or her needs and desires. The author, or so the myth goes, creates the text as an offering of options and choices, of stories that make and unmake themselves anew in every reading, and then surrenders the building blocks to the reader who then turns into a writer-once-removed. Not. A lot has been written about agency,⁽⁶⁾ but texts that give the reader room for co-creativity, that turn him or her into their de facto author have not yet appeared. Instead, readers of hyperfiction, in particular, often complain that they feel at the mercy of the text, pulled hither and thither by invisible paths and hidden guard fields, unable to determine even basically what the text is about, let alone make sense of it (which is not an approved approach to hyperfiction, anyway). Many of the second generation hypertext-critics even claim that hypertext imposes far more restrictions on the text and the reader than good, old linear story-writing. *Uncle Buddy* seems to know, standing in a corner with a knowing smile, waiting for us to find out. *King of Space*, on the other hand, deals with the active reader, the possibility to make sense of a text which a hyperfiction - allegedly - offers to its reader. But in *King of Space*, this possibility soon turns out to be an empty promise and the text reasserts its power - over the reader, over itself.

Uncle Buddy

The Death of the Reader

Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse is a HyperCard hyperfiction that comes with two tapes of music and assorted materials on paper (including mock proofs of a short story). Central to the fiction are author-musician Arthur 'Buddy' Newkirk, his band, the Reptiles, and his love for elusive Emily Keane. The fiction is about growing up in the US in the 1970s and early 1980s, about popular culture and the development of the microcomputer, of electronically amplified and distorted music, of grassroot-movements and eventually (or somewhere in-between) about the end of youth. The text reaches the reader in the form of a computer-application that has to be installed on a local hard-drive, but one can easily imagine it to be the neatly customized user-interface of late Buddy Newkirk's personal portable, the House serving as entrance point to the different, diverging and interweaving threads that make up this man's life, stored and documented on silicon. *Uncle Buddy* can be read and reread, the reader can play with the tarot or the "burrower", browse the lyrics to the Reptiles's records, read through *McDaid's* version of *Pavic's Dictionary of the Khazars*, or peruse any or all of the other stacks of the Funhouse, the Haunt House and the Necropolis.

Although HyperCard is used in a less flexible and volatile way than it could be, the Funhouse at first appears to be a rather open text,⁽⁷⁾ the bits and pieces of a life, provided by someone for the reader to make sense of in her own good time, taking the parts she deems important, leaving other aspects unactualized by choice or at random. *Uncle Buddy* uses only few resources for imposing rhythms and patterns on the reader - which frees the reader to arrange the puzzle at will. However, the text explicitly denies the possibility of making ultimate sense: McDaid does not seem to believe in the wide open text, deserted by the author to be created and recreated by the reader - any reader, any time.

The Author

Dialog boxes are a well known feature of computer applications: ever so often, a click invokes a little window that offers the user a piece of more or less intelligible information together with a choice of action, be it only to close the window in question. Those boxes seem to come up from the depths of the program, carrying the voice of the program or even of the computer itself - or rather, to take a step back from this popular anthropomorphism, the voice of the programmer, who points out errors and options. In the case of a hyperfiction that is usually written and programmed by one and the same person, all but the very standard dialog boxes can easily be perceived as the voice of the author, offering help with understanding the text in a "dear reader" sort of way.

Dialogs pop up all through *Uncle Buddy*, for the first time in the "legal" documents of READ ME FIRST (Fig. 1)

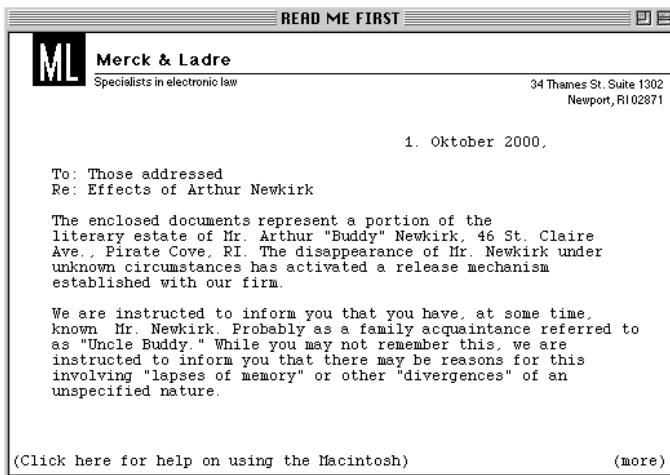


Figure 1. READ ME FIRST page from John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*

Clicking on "Click here for help on using the Macintosh" triggers a dialog that reads "Help feature not yet implemented." (Fig. 2)

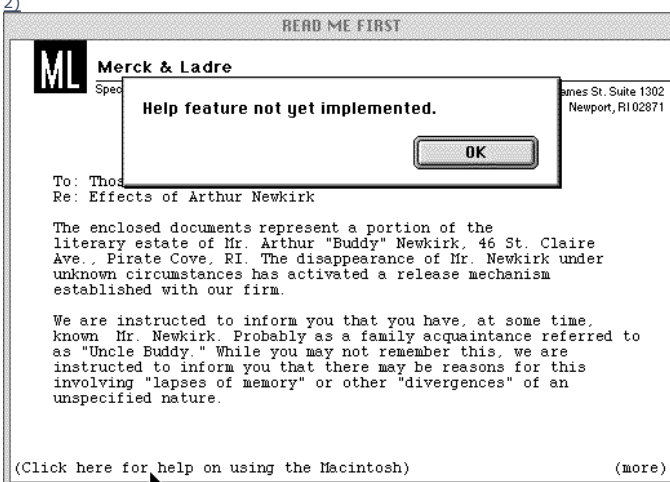


Figure 2. Example dialog pop-up in *Uncle Buddy*

"Oh, a beta-version," you think. But only for a minute. The shiny black cardboard box, the added materials in the packaging, the tapes - nothing about *Uncle Buddy* suggests that the copy you hold was meant for testing only. But if "Help feature not yet implemented" is not a standard error-message which the program returns by default, what is it? Let's have a look at some other weird dialogs. In the *Haunt House*, in *Orpheus*, a click on "Play" calls up a dialog that goes "Are you kidding? You think this made it to production? Hah." with a button that reads "Oh, well," leaving it to the reader to close the window with a resigned shrug. (Fig. 3)

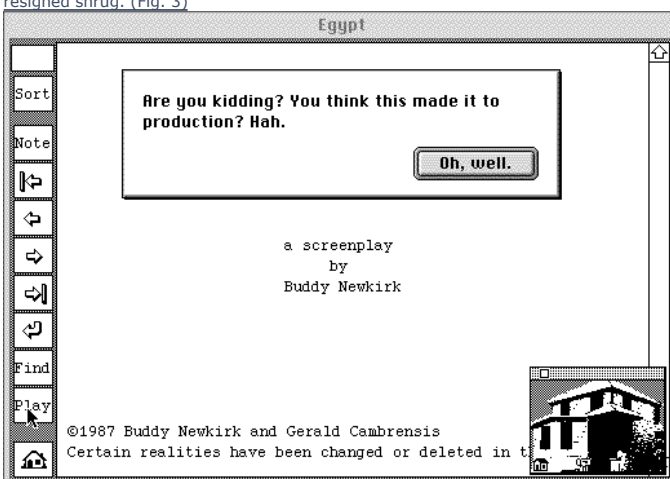


Figure 3. Another example dialog

So much for the reader's freedom to at least co-create the text of this hyperfiction. And in *Feral Guts* all buttons return: "They're just for tourists" - "OK." (Fig. 4) Once more, what seems to be a place for the reader to start interacting with the text turns out to be a dummy only. The author seems to look in on the reader every now and again, as if to say "go ahead, interact, but I've already been here".

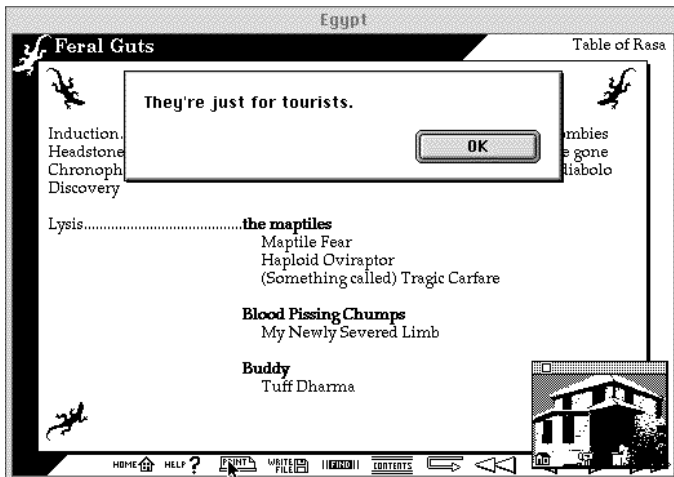


Figure 4. In Feral Guts all buttons return: "They're just for tourists" - "OK."

McDaid takes this game to its logical limit. The last screen of the deepest level of *Uncle Buddy*, the Necropolis, calls up the following dialog: "I'm sorry you saw that. You shouldn't have seen that. Now I'll have to kill you.", leaving for the reader only a button helplessly labeled "But ..." which terminates the application. (Fig 5) The text (or was it the author?) announces that it has to kill the reader and closes itself down without giving the reader a chance to reverse this process. The death of the reader - not the author. Despite or rather while deconstructing text and meaning-making, letting the reader play with the text, distort it, hack into it, *Uncle Buddy* deconstructs the myth of the disempowered author and the reader as creator, too. Although, ironically, when the program quits, every trace of the author disappears with it.



Figure 5. Terminating *Uncle Buddy*

The Active Reader

The good reader, who starts reading where she or he is told, with the READ ME FIRST document, is channeled into the fiction via a couple of (fictitious) legal documents that determine her or his access to the Funhouse: "Mr. Newkirk has passed these items into your hands for whatever purpose you wish to make of them, for any legal end whatsoever." (Fig. 6)

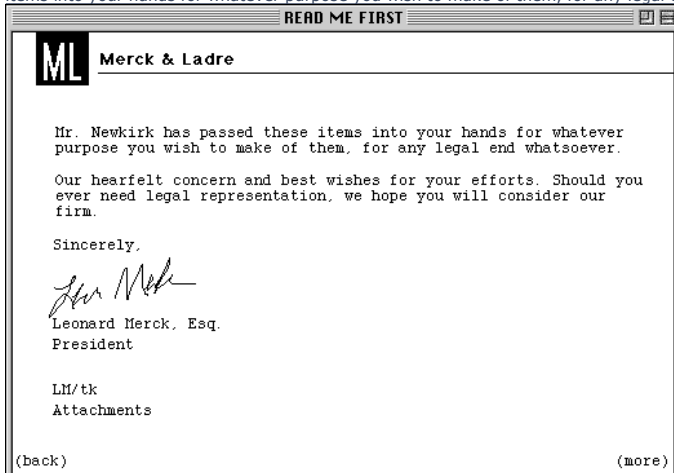


Figure 6. (Fictitious) legal documents determine access to the Funhouse

It seems as if the reader is free to do as she or he chooses with the text under her fingertips. The "legal purpose" appears to be merely a staple of legal prose - of course a law firm would not suggest their clients engage in illegal activities. Taking a closer look, however, we must find that this caveat establishes as well as regulates the author-reader-text-relationship. Presented to the reader/user as a READ ME FIRST file, the legal agreement is too close to a license agreement to ignore its applicability as a copyright notice. Indeed, the explicit delineation of the reader's rights and duties is spelt out in the manual that forms part of the rich assortment of additional materials that come with *Uncle Buddy*:

"It is strictly forbidden "[to] modify, translate, reverse engineer, decompile, disassemble, create derivative works based upon, copy (save for archival purposes) the program or the accompanying documentation; [...] remove any proprietary notices, labels, or marks on the program and accompanying documentation." (8)

So, certain kinds of freedom of the reader towards the physical text are clearly excluded.

In a not so verbatim reading, the "legal end" can be taken to refer to the situation of the reader of digital texts in general. The text does not *per se* give the reader every creative and meaning-making freedom. Rather, the reader is referred back to an internal layer of the text where it can be as open or closed as any other text, independently of the medium that transports it. The reader of *Uncle Buddy* has to actively engage in and with the text both mentally and kinetically. However, the opportunity for kinetic involvement that we do not find in texts on paper is not elevated to denote the reader's general freedom to turn the text into anything she or he wants to read. Instead the notion of the *wreader* is played with and smartly subverted in many ways throughout *Uncle Buddy*.

Start Making Sense

In fact, *Uncle Buddy* is a rather open text that time and again denies the possibility to make sense of a life - even looking back on a life that has ended [(12)]. This point is made (if implicitly, especially in the Haunt House that seems to say "Yeah, right" to Buddy's attempts to write his and Emily's story in the Funhouse) but also performed formally: The Funhouse offers the reader (not necessarily coherent) glimpses into the different parts of Buddy Newkirk's life - bits and pieces from which the reader can sample an idea of this life. But the parts of the mosaic do not come together to form a unified image. They remain a collection of facets, like a magic eye-picture - only this time, no one true image emerges from a certain, "true" point of view, but differs from viewer to viewer, from point of view to point of view, from reading to reading even.

Much like the default-paths in *King of Space* (see below), the mosaic-pieces of *Uncle Buddy* organize into units, clusters with recognizable surfaces, of all which are embedded in the central image of the Funhouse. The Funhouse is interface and motif simultaneously and suggests that, at least to a degree, the parts of the story can be brought together into a consistent whole. This impression, however, is broken and countered by the deeper levels of the Funhouse, the Haunt House and the Necropolis that can only be opened with the help of passwords. The Haunt House, which shifts the focus from Arthur Newkirk to Emily Keane, cancels the integrated view and the construction of a life-story that is attempted in the Funhouse. The level of the Necropolis, finally, the dwelling-place of the dead, negates the reader's possibility to read every bit of the text and create sense from the pieces. The Necropolis has but a single path which ends in the symbolic "death" of the reader (not the author).

With this obstinate ending, *Uncle Buddy* forces the reader to resume her or his reading, to re-enter the Funhouse, to (very probably) re-read and re-view certain stacks with a greater knowledge of the text as a whole, with knowledge gained from stacks read at a later time, from the Haunt House and the Necropolis, but also with the knowledge of the final assertion of the text's (or the author's) control over the reading-process and the eventual futility of all her attempts to create meaning and make sense. "Believe everything, at least temporarily. Believe nothing permanently." (Funhouse) "Believe nothing, at least temporarily." (Haunt House) The end may crown the work (9), but the termination of the text at the end of the Necropolis does not provide the sort of satisfactory closure we expect from (and usually find in) the last page of a book. Computer games have taught us that "death" in the digital text is merely an invitation to enter this text again with a new approach - *Uncle Buddy's* insistence on temporality and impermanence only serves to underline the understanding of the end as just one point in the progress through the text, not a fixed point (almost) outside the text from where to make sense of it in retrospect.

King of Space

The Obstinate Text

The hyperfiction *King of Space* by Sarah Smith is a forking science fiction about love and power, truth and life, which most of the time ends in a kind of navigation bridge tetris-derivate, with memory and a shoot 'em-up thrown in. Ideally, this game should be winnable, the player should be able to refill the spaceship's resources, the "story" should resume. Usually, however, the game ends in an energy-drain which entails a fatal hit and the destruction of the ship - and thus the end of the game and the narration. But this can only end the narration for the moment, the game restarts automatically, until the reader/player quits, frustrated, tired or bored. It seems that *King of Space* has a mind of its own - not only in this respect.

King of Space uses a graphic interface; the text-blocks appear in the card-format known from HyperCard, on a background with meta- and navigation-buttons. Their length is almost always cropped to the default card-size. Some of the cards have an individual graphic design, some work with sound and sometimes animated sequences are called up. What's most important, forking points are few and always clearly marked; there are no hidden links or guard fields. Whereas in hyperfictions like *Afternoon* or *Victory Garden* most nodes have multiple outgoing links, *King of Space* works with long default sequences, comparable to "paths" in Storyspace. This way, the reader is almost always oriented, which, finally, enables him or her to realize that the text obstinately dismisses his or her constructive interactions.

Orientation

What makes most hyperfictions such frustrating reads is their structural opacity: the reader is almost permanently disoriented, "lost in hyperspace" (as Ted Nelson is said to have said). Few hyperfictions, such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (Fig. 7) or Kathryn Cramer's *In Small & Large Pieces* (Fig. 8), use graphic interfaces, and then those interfaces are rarely designed as fully-fledged navigation aids. But *King of Space*, with its tetris-derivate, its "Horizator" and its animated sequences, does not deny its roots in computer games. (10) Much like games, this text relies on explicit marking, through both content and images, to pinpoint both positions within the text and choices open to the reader at certain positions.

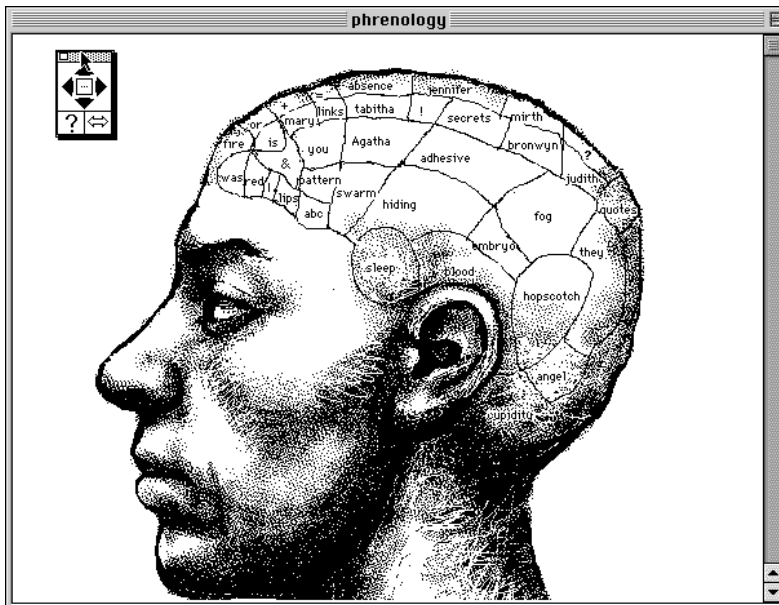


Figure 7. Graphic interface from Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*
option+command for links

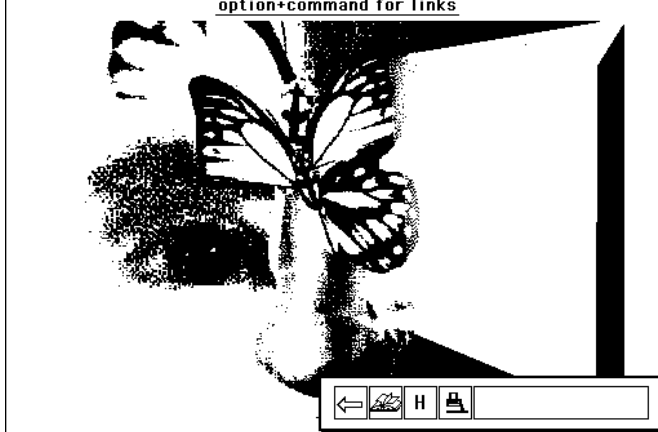


Figure 8. Graphic interface from Kathryn Cramer's *In Small & Large Pieces*

In most cases, choices in *King of Space* appear as check-boxes with short captions, as in screen 15 (11): With the last resources of his ship, Tam Rosse has managed to approach the Lady Nii, a "greatship". Beside the greatship, there is a "lifeship" with enough material on board to replenish his own or another greatship.

"But there will be a crew. A Priestess and her Red King. The chief Imperial servants in the Asteroids. The Priestess with her powers controls life and death in the Rocks. The Red King is her lover, her helper, her bodyguard. A condemned criminal, a violent man, he is linked to her by bonds as strong as life. They're trouble. But so is Tam."

At this point, Tam has two choices: "Tam Rosse brings his ship into synchronized orbit with the lifeship" and "Tam Rosse brings his ship into synchronized orbit with the greatship." (Fig. 9)

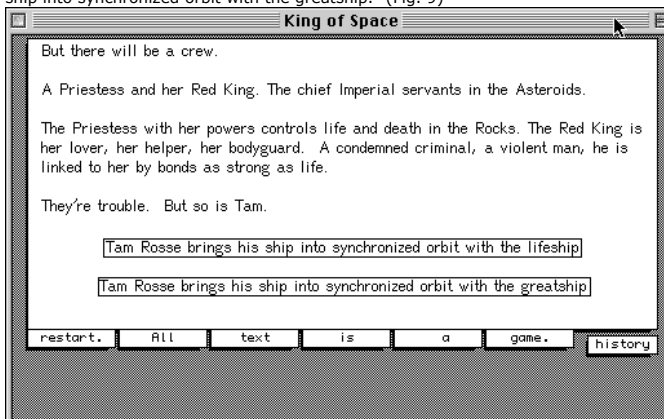


Figure 9. Tam's two choices, from *King of Space* by Sarah Smith

Both captions function as buttons with which the reader can call up an alternative path, the sentences are framed in black and thus set off from the rest of the text. There are other graphical aids, like the jagged frame of the airlock or gates and forks

that are guarded by games. Marking forks like this makes it possible for the reader not only to make informed choices, but also to retrace his or her step through a number of forks back to a point from where he or she (not the application) wants to set off again. They also let the reader realize he or she has returned to a card she has read before, a situation she/Tam has been in before.

Michael Joyce has pointed out the importance of re-reading for hyperfiction. A hyperfiction, for him, is like a love-story: "Two people meet. They fall in love. They quarrel and part. They reconcile." (12) This can go on and on, until one or both of them approach the situation with a new insight, gained either outside the circle or triggered by the realization that one is going in circles at all. But in a text-only hyperfiction with guard fields even, the reader cannot recognize a recurring node - unless she learns by heart every node she visits and even then she cannot know what happened under the surface, which new links had opened up, which ones had closed - not even which she'd visited already. By giving additional information in the form of graphics, *King of Space* allows the reader to be oriented at all times. Thus, she can notice re-vision (or re-reading) quickly and realize whatever importance a specific fiction is attaching to this feature of hypertext.

Choice

King of Space clearly marks decision-points within the text. Moreover, the content of the following card usually picks up on the motivation for the decision that brought the reader there so that the story receives a coherent explanation for why Tam behaves in the way the reader seems to make him behave (no matter whether this was really why the reader clicked what she clicked). If, in screen 15 (13), the reader lets Tam enter the greatship, the next card reads: "He looks toward the little moon for a moment. What good will it do him to go to the lifeship?" (Fig. 10)

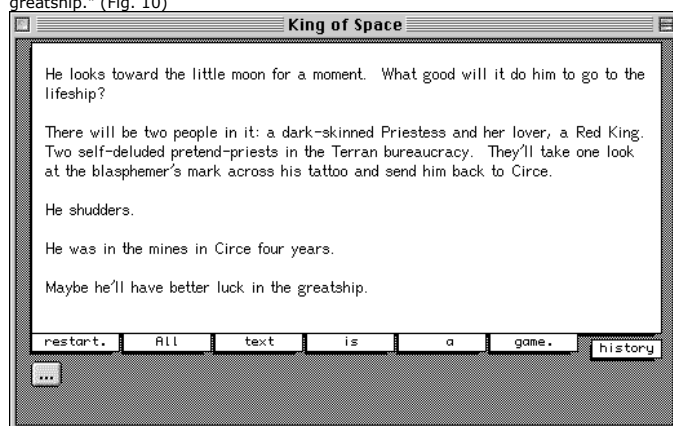


Figure 10. Decision-point in *King of Space*

If the reader chooses the lifeship, the move will not be explained in further detail, however, the next card at least re-states the setting and the situation, keeping the reader oriented: "At the door of the lifeship he looks around warily, drawing his heartsblood knife from its sheath." (Fig. 11)

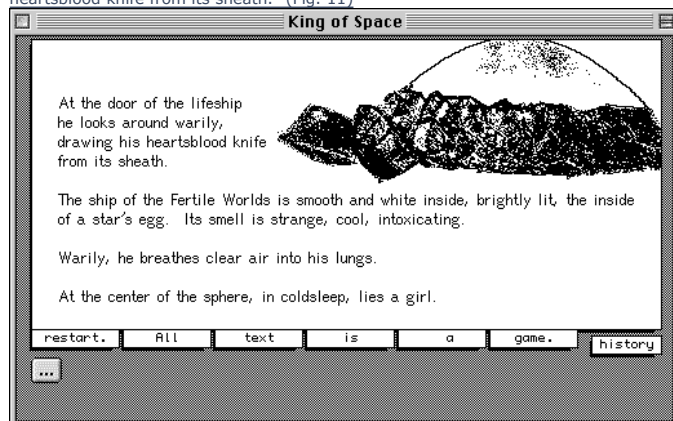


Figure 11. Keeping the reader oriented

The story seems to unfold continuously and in a motivated manner. Still, the reader gets the impression that she has been able to significantly and, more importantly, meaningfully influence the plot. Unlike in most hyperfictions, she chooses links consciously, basing her decision on information gathered and plotlines perceived. She can, according to her predisposition, choose the paths that seem to be more likely to lead to success (as in an adventure game), or those that better embody her moral standpoint (later on in the fiction, when the decisions seem to oscillate between following Tam's desires and his ulterior motives of serving the rebellion).

Tam Rosse, and with him the player/reader, again and again faces the decision whether to merely save his own life (and satisfy his sex drive, while he's at it) or whether to retain his rebel-identity. To access vital provisions, Tam needs the help of the Priestess, but this will ultimately mean going through "the ceremony" with her, becoming her servant, spacehabbed, but robbed of his memory and his identity. Whenever such a decision is due, this will be signaled to the reader optically as well as by way of content. She does not only realize that she has to choose at this point, but also, where (more or less) exactly her choices will take her (and Tam). However, despite almost perfect orientation, throughout a reading, the text more and more often turns against the reader's choice. The reader will soon find out that the power of the Priestess is always the driving power of the text - against Tam's (and the reader's) express will. At this point, the navigation aids help the reader realize only too well that the story is not going where she is trying to push it.

King of Space is a stubborn text into which certain structures of meaning are inscribed (the, presupposed, inevitability of

heterosexuality, the manipulation of history by the powers that be), structures the central character Tam, and with him the reader, cannot avoid. Again and again, the text imposes its limits on the reader's seeming freedom of choice. The reader may try, with each strategy she adopts (the Tam who opposes the priestess, the Tam who surrenders), to gain and retain control over the text. In her first reading, she might accept all events as direct results of her active choices - even a turn that appears to be contrary to the chosen path can be interpreted as a causal development - and thus be considered to be acceptable behavior of a reader-driven text. After a while, however, it becomes clear that the text is going its own way. The content (the power of sex as one of the motifs of *King of Space*) and the form (the power the interactive text has over the reader) of the fiction conflate. *King of Space* is about the struggle of the subject who tries to maintain his autonomy and identity in a hostile environment, both physically (Tam's fight for survival) and mentally (Tam, the rebel, who in dealing with the other, the enemy, has to revise his beliefs and convictions). But *King of Space* is not only about a fight, it also acts it out in the attempts of the reader who tries to stand her ground as an active and determining factor within the text. As the text works against her decisions, the reader has to exercise her mental capacities in the way described by Wolfgang Iser in *Der Akt des Lesens* - generating sense and coherence in the face of a text that refuses to yield these elements on its own accord.

Conclusion

Neither John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* nor Sarah Smith's *King of Space* liberate their readers into a yet-to-be-defined author position. Far from this, they demonstrate quite skillfully that even in the digital realm the activities of reading and writing are - much as they might differ from similar activities in the paper-world - most of the time clearly differentiated. This does not mean that hyperfiction fails, rather that early attempts to cast this genre in theoretical concepts may not have succeeded to sound every depth of their subject. If we start from the assumption that reading and writing are very different sorts of activities and that writing can have very different qualities - the passive escape into a dream world, the disciple's search for the author's message, the active engagement with the text - we can then begin to enjoy different texts and to appreciate a writer's skills without losing ourselves in her or his, presumed, universe.

In hyperfictions like *Uncle Buddy*, these skills are employed to show how the world fails to make sense, to be comfortably cast in a plot, and how our fumbling attempts to create a coherent and meaningful narrative are repelled by life, by the text. *Uncle Buddy* does so tongue-in-cheek: the usually reticent hyperfiction-author keeps sticking his head back into the Funhouse, juggling with our notions of the replaced author, the active reader, and the possibility of making meaning of a life (or a text). The text (or the author) leads us astray, offers paths and passages that turn out to be decoys. At the same time, *Uncle Buddy* makes fun of traditional meaning-making and meaning-breaking techniques alike, purposefully deconstructing the concept of the reader-turned-author, the wreader.

King of Space, on the other hand, takes the shape of a dystopian science-fiction. The reader's failure to influence the course and the outcome of the text becomes threatening in the context of rebellion and government abuse. The text refuses to comfort, not only by withholding the consolation of a definite end. But who made happy endings the law? The climax of *King of Space* is certainly reached when the readers realizes the failure of her attempts to push Tam Rosse's story and fate into a deliberately chosen direction. At this point, the way she engages with the story changes from a rather naive attempt to create one's own preferred story from the building-blocks of hypertext to acknowledging the futility of this attempt and to adopting a reading strategy that can deal with such an obstinate text - a reading strategy (and an approach to life) that has yet to be found ...

Most hyperfictions and the genre as such have been accused of many and diverse failures, from falling short of the promises made by hypertext theory to being of lesser literary merits. *Uncle Buddy* and *King of Space*, though not widely read (probably due to the fact that texts written in HyperCard are limited to the Macintosh-world), are certainly situated at the top of an iceberg of varying quality. But for a reader who agrees to appreciate somebody else's ways of viewing the world - instead of taxing the text's success as embodiment of certain strands of literary theory - hyperfiction has a lot to offer. If you want to enjoy reading a text that deals smartly with life in a modern computerized world as well as with the possibilities and limitations of writing and reading in the digital medium, reading or re-reading a hyperfiction promises to be as entertaining as it is enlightening.

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Notes

(1) Jürgen Fauth's "Poles In Your Face" is a not quite current but a rather fitting example.

(2) cf. Landow 32.

(3) As Joseph Weizenbaum remarked during *Softmoderne 3* (at a panel with Wolfgang Coy on 5 Sept. 1997) *apropos* of the comparative youth of the genre: The novel took 150 years to produce a Fielding - 1996 only saw the 10th anniversary of the publication of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*.

(4) On overinterpretation, see e.g. Umberto Eco in Eco, *Zwischen Autor und Text: Interpretation und Überinterpretation*.

(5) Birkerts 81.

(6) For agency see esp. Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.

(7/9) On the subject of "open text" - in several instances *Uncle Buddy* suggests to the reader to exert her powers over the text on a deeper level than that of hypertextual structures. To find the password to the second part, the "Aunt Em's Haunt House", the reader has to hack into the stacks using ResEdit. Among the stacks that do not yield passwords (or simple program-related information), one surrenders the words: "Finis coronat operam" - the end crowns the work. So you've hacked into the bare bones of the text to find the author's always already there, making sure the last laugh's on him.

(8) Manual for *Uncle Buddy*.

(9) LINK GOES TO (7)

(10) "King of Space is a hypertext science fiction novel. Neither a traditional computer game nor a conventional novel, it mixes text with animation, mazes, puzzles and games." Sarah Smith, *King of Space*, "Cover" -> "Playing the Game."

(11/13) Counting along the default-path from "Begin", not counting the screens of the two "movies". After screen 15, it is not possible to identify screens anymore - here is where orientation - and especially academic quoting - starts to fail in *King of Space*.

(12) Joyce, "Nonce Upon Some Times" 582.

(13) LINK GOES TO (11)

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