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## Some Hyperfictions I'd like to mention: Confessions of a binge-reader.

<http://www.tekka.net/01/?Confessions>

I am a binge-reader. I read Nutrition Facts over breakfast. The duty free magazine. I wolf down novels. Sometimes, I hate to go to work, to sleep even and everything around me is overcast with people and places straight out of my latest obsession. Their memory only starts to wash away after I have firmly closed the back cover over their strange and gauzy lives. Then sometimes, a book may sit by my bedside for weeks, the bookmark far to the left. But it will be consumed, eventually. The last page pulls like gravity.

With hyperfictions, this is different. They float on the monitor in self-contained screens, half covering, half covered by other windows: e-mail, writing, online-banking; parallel, equi-valent views into the clutter of my hard drive. Every single screen of a hyperfiction has to struggle against the pull of half a dozen other applications and every victory is as brief as the page it calls up. Reading comes across as hard work, every click an effort. And indeed, from day one, the euphoric accounts of how hypertext reconfigures our reading and writing habits (if "we" happen to be the fortunate few computer-literates of the Western world) were accompanied by complaints about the utter unreadability of this would-be embodiment of postmodern theory.

Hyperfictions are like sushi: you have to pass the raw-fish threshold first. But after that, you cannot not have them, at least once in a while. For hyperfiction, this threshold is the click-through to the next node. And of course the fact that it is part of every node does not make things easier. Close some windows. Turn down the TV. Load a disk. From early, text-only specimens that were unyielding by design, hyperfiction has quickly developed techniques that make them hard to quit. Finger-food for those with a taste for literature.

Discussing Michael Joyce's *Afternoon - a Story* has become almost a breach in etiquette in journals and at conferences. Too much might have been written about the father of hyperfiction - and at the expense of other works: the larger body of "classic" hyperfiction of the 1990s is still

poorly charted. And yet. What was it, beside being "first to market" that has made Afternoon a bestseller and one that has indeed been read (in classrooms, on desks, if not in bathtubs)? Afternoon has gravity (the pull of fame, the pull of curiosity, the pull of cunningly launched insider-tips about hidden or "last" nodes). And above all, it does not take No for an answer.

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begin

I try to recall winter. < As if it were yesterday? > she says, but I do not signify one way or another.

By five the sun sets and the afternoon melt freezes again across the blacktop into crystal octopi and palms of ice-- rivers and continents beset by fear, and we walk out to the car, the snow moaning beneath our boots and the oaks exploding in series along the fenceline on the horizon, the shrapnel settling like relics, the echoing thundering off far ice. This was the essence of wood, these fragments say. And this darkness is air.

< Poetry > she says, without emotion, one way or another.

Do you want to hear about it?



The obedient reader who presses RETURN to start the text, enters through the text node "begin" that ends in a question: "Do you want to hear about it?" This question makes it at the same time harder and easier to click on through. Harder, because suddenly RETURN is not enough to go on, suddenly I have to make an active choice. Easier, because the text seems to accommodate my potential reaction to the first node.

The navigation bar that is anchored at the bottom of every screen accepts only two answers: Yes and No. "Y" links to a congruent follow-up node, but surprisingly, "N" does not exit the text. Quite to the contrary, the "no"-node seems to agree with me: "I understand how you feel". Or does it? I may have hit "N" for several reasons: The obscure tone of "Begin", anger at the question which I may have misconstrued as rhetorical (after all, the literature I know usually proceeds regardless of my opinions), the general discomfort of reading from a screen. The "no"-node suggests others: the glare of the summer's day, the failure of progress, a general skepticism towards the possibility of certainty and meaning. One option, though, is absent: that I might just dismiss Afternoon and the

form in which it is brought to me. The next click, Y, N or RETURN pushes me onward, and to the very same node. By this time I'm hooked: the text dares taunt me who wouldn't leave a busticket unread.

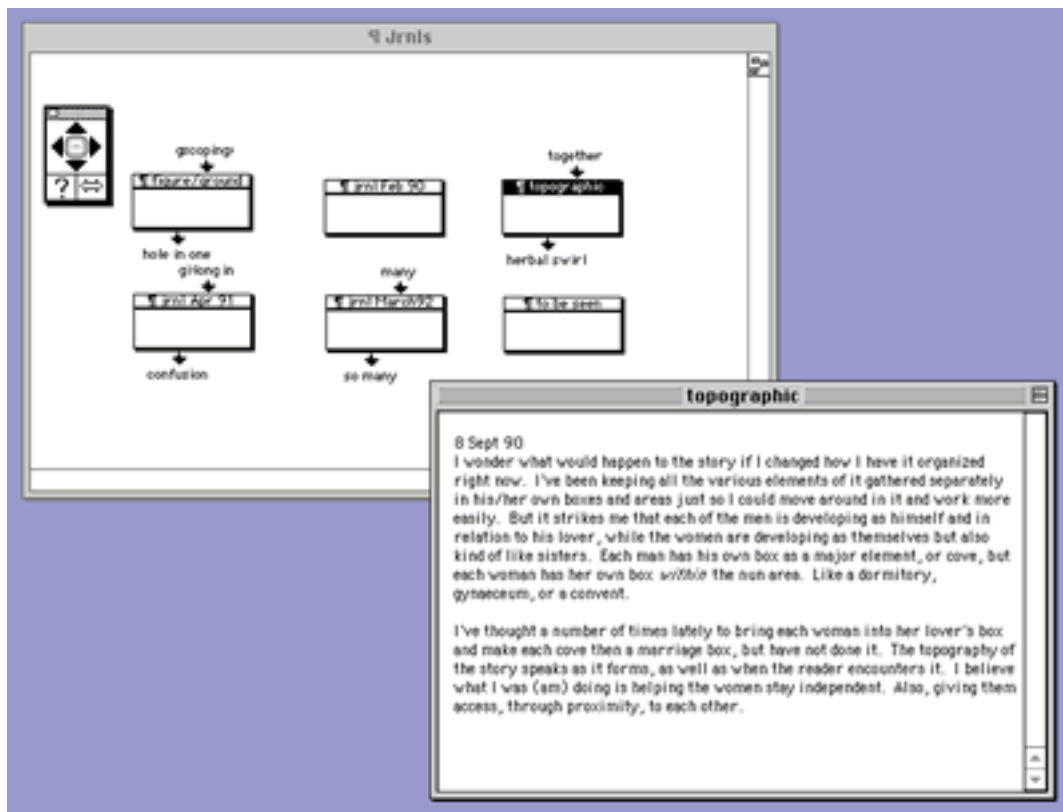
Afternoon intercepts a reader's possible initial misgivings. What better way to start a story than to cater to different types of readers: those who are willingly drawn in as well as the skeptical ones who do not want to know - about the story or about what this strange new literary genre has to offer. The technique Joyce employs here is the navigational feint (see Mark Bernstein's "Patterns in Hypertext" for more examples). What looks like a button is also an integral part of the text -- one that is deliberately misleading the reader, or leading her on. Where software designers and usability experts balk, the artist may proceed unperturbed. We have entered the funhouse, after all.

Another way of tying the reader to the text is the use of graphic interfaces. I have seen the menu; how could I leave after the first course? One of the earliest usages of a graphic interface may have been the map view that the more sophisticated Storyspace readers supply as a backdrop to the text-nodes. Dynamic sitemaps shift with every click, refocusing on the current node and displaying the surrounding text in a symbolic and coded way: disclosing the text's depth (or width) and at the same time opaque enough to inspire curiosity.



Often a most confusing orientation-aid, the map views sit in the background, quietly displaying (or at least hinting at) all the text has to offer and all the quitter would miss. And when Carolyn Guyer's Quibbling suggests that the arrangement of the nodes in relation to each other is up to experimentation, the map's purpose is pushed beyond merely indicating places visited as opposed

to nodes yet to be read. Once this feature has been learnt, a map view will always be a promise of what lies in wait for me and what I can generate by myself.



From Deena Larsen's *Marble Springs* (1993) to the more recent *Califia* (M.D. Coverly), hyperfictions map the plot onto a graphic interface (and vice versa). The town-plan in *Marble Springs*, the house in *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*, the stamps in *Notes Toward Absolute Zero*, the body-cut ups in *Patchwork Girl* or the collages in *In Small and Large Pieces* orient the reader and advertise themselves. Note that, unlike the map-views, these representations do not claim to be full-fledged navigation-aids. Thus, they are less disorienting to the reader who does not look toward them as 1:1 translations of the content — which is what sitemaps have taught us to expect from map views. In fact, it is this lack of details, the symbolic encoding that make them so alluring. They are teasers, not abstracts.

This technique can be found, not quite coincidentally, on many commercial websites, online-magazines, eShops or business-platforms. Look at the [New York Times](#), the [Bank of America](#), the [National Health Service](#), or even this magazine. They all pack as many entrance-ways into their site as possible onto the first page, which serves as a launch-pad to visitors with different tastes and interests, and repeat as many of these teasers as they can on subsequent pages in order to pull the reader from one part to the next. In the past few years, we have learnt to navigate information and entertainment-sites along visually structured macro- and micro-representations of their respective content. Hyperfictions have developed along the same lines as commercial websites: from the single-purpose cover-page that gets one go at winning or losing the visitor to

text-, image- and sound-based representations of a whole that pull the reader into one thread or topic and then up again and into the next.

But unlike the so-called redundant navigation-interfaces of commercial websites that try to cater to visitors with different interests and goals (who may not even be welcome to all sections, like the economy-flyer who should not be encouraged to register for executive services), there is no single task to be completed in a hyperfiction. If anything, closure is reached through saturation, not achievement. M.D. Coverly's *Califia* does not pull the reader through one of three possible passages to its end, the treasure-trove. The core of *Califia* can only be found by those who travel all paths; the core is the text gathered by the persevering reader. The promise of a treasure, the three idiosyncratic passage-ways into the text, the graphic interface that is both call and reward -- they all serve as constant reminders that there is more to the text than has so far met the eye, that the network is far from exhausted.

Hyperfictions may not be for the literary gourmet who likes to indulge in a piece of prose in the figurative bathtub. Hyperfictions are for the addict to whom the sight of the fridge is the promise of a bowl of mousse. Who cannot pass the candy-shop. You don't read a gripping hyperfiction like a thrilling novel: preferably in one session. Instead, you return many times, sometimes after hours, sometimes after months, and the icon that sits patiently on your desktop soon teases as much as a wad of paper with the bookmark far to the left.

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