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## (Un)Easy Listening.

### Anne Bösenberg and Hanna Linn Wiegel's *Gerne zuschauen*

<http://www.tekka.net/02/?Audio>

Anne Bösenberg and Hanna Linn Wiegel's *Gerne zuschauen* is called a *Hörspiel*. That's German for audio-play, or audio-book, but what it really is, is an audio-hypertext. The first of its kind I've seen -- heard -- and probably the only one there is. *Gerne zuschauen* -- the title is a cruel joke: you'd *like to watch*, but there is nothing to see -- held me riveted (almost) to the CD player that is its only interface. Then the new-gadget sex appeal waned, and I was left with a not-quite-satisfying user experience. Yet there is something there ...

The plot is easy and inherently linear enough: you go to the theatre (or not), taking detours and various means of transportation and end up enjoying the show -- or not. The obstacles imposed by vehicles (like your bike), clumsy queue-strategies and other methods of procrastination are cushioned between singular start- and end-points: you begin by leaving the house and you end up at a destination. That's closure, in a way, but merely mechanical. While I'm comfortable saying that I've read and am done reading *Victory Garden*, *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* or *These Waves of Girls*, I feel I've merely stumbled through *Gerne zuschauen*. I suspect that after the second or third listening my reaction would tend toward a flat, "Well, so that's how it works".

This feeling of indifference may have been triggered by the content of this individual piece. I don't really get to care whether the character makes it to the theater. I don't even get to find out who he -- or I, the "you" of the narrative -- is. While many digital fictions (and more computer games) use an opening sequence to help the user get acquainted with the interface and the plot parameters, Bösenberg and Wiegel commence without an exposition. In addition, they double the cognitive challenge by overlaying the spoken text with audio-clips from films, from *The Children's Hour* through *Terminator*. The execution of the plot alone disorients the user and makes it nearly impossible to identify with the characters.

Perhaps the authors expect too much of their audience. If the reader is to be engaged with a work, she needs something to identify with; she needs to be presented with something more exciting than just a novel interface. She needs to feel emotional commitment. Just *getting there* isn't sufficient. The way *Gerne zuschauen* is structured it offers nothing of ongoing interest to the reader.

Or is it the technology that's the problem? Is audio hypertext the step beyond the bottom line of usability that most users would be neither willing nor equipped to take? The discussion about audio and hypertext (rather than audio-hypertext) usually centers around the creation of *accessible* websites that can be "read" by a voice generator without loss of information. This includes recreating the navigation structure, which, however, the usability-experts have already trimmed down to be as little labyrinthine as possible. Hypertext fiction, on the other hand, courts the labyrinth and so would an audio hypertext fiction.

Another issue is the slowness of the interface. A hypertext challenges the reader to click the first link that strikes her fancy; in *Gerne zuschauen*, the listener has to wait for instructions at the end of every node. This makes for an unusually contemplative browsing experience. As soon as rereading sets in, however, speed becomes an issue: one has to sit again through every single node to come to the navigation instructions (unless, of course, one has a perfect numerical memory).

So, is this genre passé before it has even arrived? Many computer games rely on acoustic cues (think *Myst* or *The Neverhood*). Similar features could be used as navigation aids and anchors in an audio hyperfiction. Using different speakers for different characters helps the user identify (with) those characters. Familiar plot genres and a mission (however abstract or distorted) will keep the user going with a sense of purpose until there is sufficient immersive gravity to pull her through to a point of (perceived) closure (even if the *plot* gets lost or is dismissed on the way).

And, in fact, with no visual interface to distract the user, minimal physical movement (two buttons, one finger) and the reliance on a (for most people) secondary sense, audio hypertext requires and creates a heightened concentration that may engage the user more deeply than most hyperfictions will. Just make sure you don't store the disk in the same case as your audio books for long highway trips.

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