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Internet Hyperfiction

Abstract:

Since 1982 multilinear and interactive literature has been written in the hypertext media. Until now the authors have been obsessed with traditional literary conventions, which has often made the hypertexts seem rather academic and pretentious. But that may change.

During the last five years a new breed of writers have discovered the possibilities on the Internet. They address a wider audience than lecturers and very enthusiastic bibliophiles, in a form that finds a more popular balance between traditional storytelling virtues and the more avant-garde elements. This new tendency can be observed in hyperfictions like *The Unknown* and on the following pages I will establish how and why it should be possible to make hyperliterature more popular than it is at the present, if writers are willing to move a little further towards the more lay readers. As an example of how this could be happening the conclusion will list what seems to be the main reasons why *The Unknown* to a higher degree seems to succeed when it comes to capturing the reader without loosing any of the experimental edge that is still a part of hypertext due to its modest age.

Can it ever Become a Popular Art Form that is also Innovative?

Mark Bernstein said at the TP21CL conference that links are out, that it's all cycles now, and that "we've" known that for two years. Good thing we didn't know that, or else we may have

been reluctant to explore the nature of the link as a poetic, as a new grammar, as a conceptual device with great possibility. We didn't know that the link was a dead end, so we played with it.

- Scott Rettberg at Cybermountain Colloquium (1999)

Introduction

My interest in online literature and poetry was awakened by a chance encounter with a site called *Hyperizons*[1], which had links to many online hyperfictions. During my casual reading of these hyperfictions I noticed that most of them had very intellectual and postmodern aesthetics. I found most of them somewhat tiresome with their obligatory meta-fictionality, their obscurity, deliberate disorientation, random links, and lack of coherence. Other commentators sometimes report similar feelings:

The response I get to "Grammatron" from beginning students in hypertext semester after semester is disappointment. […]
ask anyone familiar with a computer if they would rather spend an hour with [the game 'Redneck Rampage'] or Michael Joyce's Afternoon-;a text based hypertext written with Storyspace and recently touted in TIME as the seminal work of hypertext-;and the drunk redneck wins hands down, at least in my classes.

(Jeff Parker, 1999)

J. Yellowlees Douglas reports how her students found the hyperfiction *Forking Paths* unreadable and had to resort to a default function, thus reading it linearly.

Since they failed repeatedly to find words that yielded links, they complained that they could not read at all. […] The right directional button, quite helpfully, invariably yielded fresh places to read, and soon the readers were concluding that this was the only way they could move through the narrative at all,

(Douglas, 2000, 76)

I thus started wondering why there was such an overweight of experimental and avant-garde works.

It seemed there was no comprehensive hyperfiction that could demonstrate that more down-to-earth hyperfictions could also work well within the medium. But then I came across *The Unknown*, written by Scott Rettberg, Dirk Stratton, William Gillespie and Frank Marquardt, a hyperfiction initially written to promote the publication of a book. The book was never published, but the four writers continued writing on the hyperfiction and it grew into a gigantic work of roughly 500-600 lexias (about 600 book pages) with a mixture of traditional literary values and experimentation with linking. It struck me as being one of the few hyperfictions that has a fairly unassuming tone and content and thus also appeals to the lay reader. Scott Rettberg, one of the authors expressed their writing philosophy at a colloquium:

Too many rules can kill a party. We weren't writing our dissertations, we weren't writing for a room filled with scholars. We were writing for fun, to an audience that we imagined would potentially enjoy our writing.

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[1] www.hyperizons.com

Readers. Those people are important, I think. Those people who read your stuff. If they aren't important to you as a writer, you're masturbating. Not that that's a crime. But it is lonely, even if you are very good at it.

I'd like to see a hypertext literature with an audience that talks back. I'd like to see hypertext that takes itself seriously as a literature, without taking itself so seriously that it loses its sense of humor. I'd like to see hypertext that lives within a changing world, rather than apart from it.

(Rettberg, 1999)

This hyperfiction worked better for me than the ones that try so hard to subvert the conventions of print literature. For me it is the hyperfictions that work best in practise, both in terms of entertainment and experimentation with the medium, which should be developed further. It is dangerous to base directions for hyperfiction aesthetics on theories about what is fitting for the medium, because hyperfiction then risks becoming too artificial, forced and out of touch with readers. Furthermore, theory tends to become based on subjective views on the nature of reading and personal literary values.

For example, J. Yellowlees Douglas criticises Laura Miller and Sven Birkerts for assuming that they speak for the true Reader when they criticise hyperfiction for stealing, in Miller's words, the 'beloved author's voice' that 'the common reader craves'[2], or in Birkerts' words that hyperfiction ruins it for the reader 'who goes to work to be subjected to the creative will of another' (Birkerts, 1994, 163). It is not just surrender to the author that makes up a valuable reading experience. This point is proved by 'difficult' books, like *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Gravity's Rainbow*, as mentioned by Douglas (2000, 150). While it is probable that these works require a more active reader than more straight stories, it is still questionable that they should serve as models for hyperfiction aesthetics because hypertext's traits supposedly have a similar effect on the reader. Could not the medium just as well accommodate intricate detective stories or thrillers?

Presently, most hyperfiction authors seem determined to write texts that are supremely postmodern. But the danger may be that if the postmodern aesthetics are embodied and enclosed perfectly by the medium then there is no friction whatsoever between medium and content. There is nothing to generate the tension between the artist's wants and the medium's limits that generated *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*, for example. Perhaps the real challenge for hyperfiction writers will be to produce writing that is not postmodern, but realistic. Perhaps realist, classical literature is the most difficult type of literature to write well in hypertext because the medium seems to sabotage any illusion. To use the medium's features to create a comprehensive and convincing illusion is hard because of the links' 'wake-up calls' and the alienating nature of the hardware, while creating a postmodern work of art is to 'go with the flow' because the medium itself tends to enhance the postmodern feel of the text. *The Unknown*, to be discussed in chapter four, is one of the few hyperfictions to make a thorough attempt to offer the reader a sufficiently comprehensive, fictional universe.

In the beginning of his very influential book *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, the important hypertext theorist and lecturer at Brown University, George P. Landow describes one of the sources of inspiration that prompted him to make the connection from poststructuralism to hypertext.

When designers of computer software examine the pages of *Glas* or *Of Grammatology*, they encounter a digitalised, hypertextual Derrida;

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[2] Miller, www.claptrap.com, 43.

(Landow, 1997, p. 2)

George Landow, Jay David Bolter and others see the poststructuralist theories about a new outlook on discourse as calls for a new medium that can embody it better than print. None of the poststructuralist theorists, however, directly requested a new medium for practising 'writerly' (Barthes) writing. They philosophised about the ideal kind of text that would undermine the certain bourgeois ideological power that has become an inherent part of the print medium. But Landow and his fellow hypertext enthusiasts connect all poststructuralist theories to supposed traits of hyperfiction in their crusade against the traditional values of print literature.

We must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks. <u>Almost all parties to this paradigm shift, which marks a revolution in human thought, see electronic writing as a direct response to the strengths and weaknesses of the printed book.</u>

(Landow, 1997, p.2, my emphasis)

It is a logical conclusion for him that if hypertext is to embody the ideas of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and other poststructuralists, then it will have to avoid all values of the traditional novel. But problem with this conclusion is that it impedes the development of mainstream hyperfictions and that it is based on the purely theoretical assumption that poststructuralist aesthetics will be the most appropriate ones for hyperfiction. Ruling theorists (Landow, Bolter, Joyce) have from the outset claimed that the unique traits of hyperfiction almost necessitated a poststructuralist poetics. But contrary to what many theorists seem to think, there is no 'natural' relation between postmodernism and hypertext. The problem is that it now seems as if there *is* such a relation because those praising the revolution of the poststructuralist paradigm within hypertext have dominated the scene so heavily, impeding any popularisation of the medium.

Thus, theorists have through roughly 15 years advocated the view that hyperfiction should be everything that print is supposed not to be, as listed in Landow's quotation above. This has naturally not done much to increase the popularity of the medium. Laura Miller voices this fact in *The New York Times* online:

and I've yet to encounter anyone who reads hypertext fiction. No one, that is, who isn't also a hypertext author or a journalist reporting on the trend.
[…]
Surely those readers, however few, must exist, but what's most remarkable about hyperfiction is that no one really wants to read it, not even out of idle curiosity. The most adventurous souls I know, people amenable to sampling cryptic performance art and even those most rare and exotic of creatures, readers of poetry who aren't poets themselves -- all shudder at the thought, for it's the very concept of hypertext fiction that strikes readers as dreary and pointless.

(1998)

It is time to at least attempt to write more coherent, entertaining and mainstream hyperfiction, in order to find out if it can work well within the medium. Therefore, this paper will examine and compare two typically postmodern hyperfictions named *The Buddha Smiled* and *The Straight Path* with *The Unknown*, a layman 's hyperfiction. This is done in order to illustrate two points:

- **That hyperfictions which are mainly based on poststructuralist ideas tend to have very little or no regard for the "average" reader and thus very little appeal.**

- **That hyperfiction can indeed be innovative while also being widely popular.**

- **That hyperfiction may have a future as a viable art form if it becomes more accessible.**

Chapter one gives a general introduction to relevant hypertext and reader traits. It starts out with describing a few forms of reader types and their different behaviour when using hypertext. Main distinguishing traits of hypertext are then listed and discussed. Lastly, different types of linking and their connotations are listed and described.

Chapter two discusses concepts and issues related to hypertext theory, which combined with chapter one should provide a launching pad for the discussion in chapter three and four, of the qualities and drawbacks of two prize winning hyperfictions and *The Unknown*.

Chapter three does two things: it describes main poststructuralist points and the connection between them and hypertext theory. In addition to this, it discusses the two poststructuralist hyperfictions and identifies their 'model reader' – the kind of reader they address, in order to give an indication of why they seem to have such a narrow reader appeal and, judging from many commentators' remarks (Miller 1998), low popularity.

Chapter four studies *The Unknown*, its innovations, general aesthetics, and breaks with poststructuralist doctrines, in order to show that it does not need to have the level of ambiguity and academic theorising that many other hyperfictions have, in order to offer a valuable and new kind of reading experience.

The conclusion succinctly and directly compares the traits of the two poststructuralist hyperfictions and those of *The Unknown* in relation to their range of appeal. It concludes that the content of *The Unknown* get a bit repetitive and long-winded sometimes and that its value therefore mainly lies in its imaginative use of the medium, and that it constitutes a blueprint for other hyperfiction authors. Lastly it concludes that more mainstream hyperfiction does have a future as an art form.

In order to clarify the discussion in this paper I have used some concepts that perhaps generalise somewhat, but that are descriptive and helpful. I have used the 'first generation hyperfiction' to designate the hyperfiction that have been written since the mid-eighties for publishing on diskette and online hyperfiction with similar poetics. The hyperfictions published by Eastgate Systems Inc.[3] are examples of this kind of hyperfictions. They are 'serious', have poststructuralist-inspired aesthetics, an avant-garde feel, and try to avoid the conventions of novels and other book literature. "Second generation" hyperfictions, in contrast, are those that have mostly been written since the mid-nineties, that have aspirations towards attracting readers and do not hesitate to mix in aesthetics of print, 'genre' literature in their attempt to captivate the reader.

The term 'Hypertext' is simply used to signify HTML-text as found on the Internet. It denotes the medium of linked electronic text as such. 'Hyperfiction' denotes everything that is part of electronic

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[3] At www.eastgate.com

literature. It is hard to define what the borders of hyperfiction and hypertext are, but it is fair to say that the whole Internet site that contains the hyperfiction (and not just a link to it) is part of the fiction, even if it has non-fiction lexias. In the case of *The Unknown*, the whole site constitutes the hyperfiction, because all the elements play a part in making up the experience of the narrative. Unless it is stated, both 'hypertext' and hyperfiction' signify texts that are online on the Internet and word-based (i.e. images and sounds do not make up the predominant part of the text).

Roland Barthes used the term "lexia" in his book *S/Z* to mean a unit of text. In this paper it designates what is also sometimes called a node, namely the enclosed unit of text that each link leads to in hyperfiction.

I use the term 'enthusiasts' to signify those who tend to see hypertext as an inherently poststructuralist medium that should be used for experimenting with anti-conventional ways of discourse. They often seem to believe that hyperfiction's prime objective is to break with the conventions of print literature. These writers and theorists include people such as Mark Bernstein, the director of the hyperfiction "publisher" Eastgate Systems Inc., Michael Joyce, Stuart Moulthrop and Robert Coover all authors and hypertext theorists, Jay Bolter and George Landow, leading theorists and authors of two of the most important books on hyperfiction: *Writing Space* and *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. The latter title illustrates the fact that these people are the main advocates for seeing hypertext as a revolutionary, poststructuralist medium that must not be corrupted by literary print conventions such as a build-up of suspense or designated openings and endings.

'Sceptics', on the other hand are the few theorists that speak against the enthusiasts' claims that hyperfiction should remain completely unpolluted by Western enlightenment values of progress and cause and effect, their simplified, 'infocentric' (Miall) view of the reading process and the Reader and their tendency to draw parallels between reader response and critical theory and hypertext traits. The main sceptics are David Miall, Rune Aarseth and Sven Birkerts, and they argue against the enthusiasts for various reasons. Miall finds the theorising of Landow and others too determined to make hypertext seem poststructuralist by nature and often too quick and subjective in their argumentation and definitions. Rune Aarseth finds the tying together of hypertext traits and reader response/poststructuralist theory too artificial, and Sven Birkerts simply do not like the effects of this new medium and the way the enthusiasts praise it.

Furthermore, I use 'The Unknown' when I refer to the four authors of the hyperfiction as a group and '*The Unknown*' (in italics) when referring to the hyperfiction.

Lastly, the reader needs to know that when I refer to the Internet sites that hold the hyperfictions *The Unknown*, *The Straight Path* and *The Buddha Smiled* I do not write the complete URL (Internet address) every time, but only the name of the particular lexia in question. Thus, if there is referred to a lexia in *The Unknown*, with the address /unknown/, then the reader must insert it into the address and write "www.unknownhypertext/unknown.htm" in order to find it on the Internet. Similarly, if it for example says "*The Straight Path*, /k/, 1999", it means that the quote is located in a lexia on the address "www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/straightpath/k.html". If it is a quote from *The Buddha Smiled*, and the reference says, for example, /spiral/, then the full address is www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/buddha/spiral.html.

Chapter 1

> When you read from a cybertext [i.e. hypertext], you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. […] This is very different from the ambiguities of a linear text.
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> - Rune Aarseth, *Cybertext* p.3 (1997)

A General Introduction to Relevant Hypertext and Reader Traits

This chapter aims to provide a general background to the discussion of how, in broad terms, ruling hypertext theory has influenced most hyperfictions either to presuppose a highbrow reader with a penchant for postmodern writing or to disregard the reader completely in a theory-dictated quest for poststructuralist-inspired ideals. Main traits of hyperfiction and the elements that are essential in shaping the hypertext reading experience will be introduced. More precisely, this will involve a look at *reader types*, *main distinguishing traits of hyperfiction* and *hypertext writing techniques*. Lastly it will consider questions concerning conventions within hyperfiction.

Hypertext Reader Types

The hypertext reader bounces back and forth between the lexias, in a kind of playing with paths, which may lead him in several directions and not just "forward" in the traditional, linear sense. Hyperfiction's network structure, with its touch of labyrinthine gaming, encourages ludic reading, with playful and spontaneous choosing of links in a search for instant gratification. But reading hyperfiction is in many instances made to be serious work where the reader is presented with long lexias full of meta-fictional musing, literary theory philosophising and aggravating, seemingly random choices. This kind of hyperfiction, which is the most common kind on the Internet, tends to be extremely ambiguous and taciturn. They sometimes seem to reduce the reader's role to that of a rat in a labyrinth, trying to locate sparse pieces of meaning. As reported in some reader studies, the reader is often forced to click links randomly and give up on making any meaning in the obscure chunks of text he encounters in some hypertexts.

> […] the readers of "Forking Paths" trudged through what seemed a trackless waste. What they could glean of the content – what actually happened in each segment of text – depended on an apparatus controlling their movements governed by rules that they could not quite fathom.
>
> (Douglas, 2000, p. 78)

Ironically, hyperfiction, which can allegedly liberate readers from the constraints of print, often becomes too constraining for many readers when their only option is to follow the linked paths the author has prepared. Some readers refuse to read for very long when the reading brings them no rewards, that is, when it does not allow them to construct a reasonable explanation for the events of the fiction.

> With the "Forking Paths"-exercise, several of the readers confessed that they stopped when they became too frustrated or confused
>
> (Douglas, 2000, p. 82)

One of the reasons for the high level of ambiguity in many hyperfictions, is that many hypertext enthusiasts believe that we have become too used to just lying back and letting others paint the whole picture for us, and "what we are used to we often become used by" as the hypertext writer and theorist Michael Joyce says (1998). They believe that hypertext can change what they believe are inactive, routine reading patterns.

Hypertext does seem to possess the right features for disturbing the reader's expectations. It occupies new "writing spaces" as Bolter calls it in his book (*Writing Spaces*, 1995) and in these new writing spaces the reader often becomes much more conscious about his own situation and the text's status. He is rarely suspending his disbelief, but is more likely to remain detached and critical of the text because the necessity to choose links and the new reading situation make it more difficult for him to float along with the streaming fiction and forget about reality. The choosing requires more "work" than just leafing through a steady stream of words that somehow seems to be arranged in their only "natural" sequence. Additionally, the hypertext reader must to a higher degree consider formal aspects, like text structure. The formal aspects are not as fixed (yet) as in print literature, and all the novel ways of structuring the text inevitably make the interpretation more complicated.

Whether the hyperfiction reading experience is rewarding or not greatly depends on how well the text and the reader type correspond. General hypertext theory has tended to assume a reader that is adventurous, intellectual and patient. More precisely, the ideal reader for the enthusiasts seems to be someone who enjoys recognising and playing with postmodern, stylistic elements in an electronic environment. He is a heavy user, who reads very thoroughly and patiently, focusing also on the design, and prefers hyperfictions that first and foremost break with traditional literary discourse. The use of this "ideal" reader in hypertext theory is problematic, as readers' interpretative practices and interests in actual fact vary considerably. A few theorists, like David Miall and writers like The Unknown and Bobby Rabyd, in contrast, seem to use a more pragmatic approach and consider the average reader.

It is crucial to know readers' willingness to read unfamiliar kinds of text in order to avoid writing hyperfictions without any reader appeal that attract no attention whatsoever. By identifying some archetypical reader types, both hypertext writing and -theory may become more precise and defined, as there naturally are different conclusions to be made for different reader types. Unfortunately, theory on reader types in electronic literature is extremely sparse, but a few theorists offer worthwhile words on the subject:

The theorist David Riesman (1950, p. 259) has defined two fundamental attitudes towards new media. He calls these two contrasting types *inner-directed* and *other-directed*. Inner-directed readers redefine their role as readers by either trying to navigate through narrative space in a new way or by changing their expectations to how narratives should end or if they should end at all. They welcome experimentation with narrative conventions and they thus possess the basic prerequisite for enjoying contemporary hyperfictions. Other-directed readers can only read according to established practices and literary conventions, which leads them to find texts that differ sharply from established norms too experimental and meaningless. In reality, readers' behaviours are of course more sophisticated than that - Riesman's two reader types merely depict the opposite extremes. This rather simple definition is, nevertheless, helpful as a frame within which to plot more complex reader types like those described by J.M. Slatin.

Slatin, another hypertext theorist, writes in an article (1990) about three hypertext reader types: the browser, the user, and the co-author. His three types are mostly applicable to non-fiction hypertext, but could also suggest possible behaviour patterns when reading hyperfiction. The browser is playful, reading for entertainment and pleasure. He likes being surprised and challenged by a new kind of discourse and it is impossible to predict his course through the material, as he will probably make a virtue out of choosing the least obvious links. It is important, according to Slatin, to provide a "trail of breadcrumbs" (Bernstein), a backtracking mechanism (like the "back" button on the Internet) to let him go back when his reckless choices have brought him to something that does not interest him.

The user has a clear and limited purpose. He is looking for a specific experience or information and leaves the text when he has found what he came for or when the search seems too unpromising and aimless. He tends to focus on results and not so much on the aesthetic gratification of the words, links or images. He is what Bolter would term a "genre reader", someone who reads detective novels, Westerns, romances etc. and he mainly reads for the simple pleasure of immersing himself in the fictional world. Most contemporary online hyperfiction will almost certainly not be appreciated by this kind of reader. He would, however, no doubt, be attracted to hyperfictions with clearer stories, like *The Unknown* and *Sunshine 69.*

The reader can of course only be what Slatin calls a 'co-author' if the hypertext will let him. Very few hypertexts actually offer the option of adding new lexias to the narrative. Perhaps writers, understandably, are too attached to their creation to let it be 'diluted' by more or less artful additions from "co-authors". In any event, there is a contrast between how zealously co-authorship is praised as a revolutionary possibility and the extent to which it is actually practised in Internet texts. As Slatin himself writes:

One of the most important differences between conventional text and hypertext is that most hypertext systems, though not all, allow readers to interact with the system to such an extent that some readers may become actively involved in the creation of an evolving hypertext.

(Slatin, p. 159)

The reader can become a co-author in more or less direct ways. The most direct way to interact is when he is able to change what is already written and add new lexias. He could also just be given access to adding links, or he could just be allowed to email the author with suggestions for further story development, corrections, etc. Ironically, this last possibility appears to offer the most interesting change: The two first possibilities undoubtedly make access to the work of art too democratic, as illustrated by the poor quality of the collectively written "addventures", open to everyone on the Internet[4]. Free writing access to the text seems to dilute any originality and encourage a writing that embodies the lowest common denominator. The email possibility, in contrast, is a good way of giving the reader indirect influence on the text. The author receives the comment or suggestion and then decides if he will implement it. The revolution lies in the swiftness and easiness with which the reader can send a spontaneous reaction to the writer seconds after reading his hyperfiction. It is thus a shame that more hyperfictions do not offer the email possibility.

The most relevant hypertext reader type for most hyperfictions is undoubtedly also the most common one, namely the *browser,* who characterises the reader as player. His reading is as much a

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[4] For instance at http://addventure.com.

playful, childish exploration of *yielding* words (i.e. links in M. Joyce's terminology) that momentarily catch his interest, as a reading for the plot. He finds as much pleasure in the exploration of the hyperfiction's structure as in reading the words and therefore is patient, even if the fiction does not bring him what he expected right away.

Main Distinguishing Traits of Hyperfiction

Electronic links are what fundamentally distinguishes hyperfiction from fiction. The fact that they allow the narrative to be spread out multilinearly is what generates what theorists have identified as the medium's "unique traits". The "unique" or "defining" traits of hypertext are often emphasised as elements that should be central in hypertexts, as they are naturally what can make the reading experience different from that of books. That these particular characteristics are important is a fair assumption, but they should not completely dominate the text and be used uncritically as aesthetic goals.

Here follows descriptions of the main effects the hypertext medium tend to have on the reading experience. Writers must take it into consideration in order to realise the medium's impact on the effect of their writing.

Less stability and fewer conventions

The technological nature of hypertext is one reason for its atmosphere of unstableness. There is no tangible entity that by its immediate physical presence offers the reader simple access to it. Instead, the reader must access it through a complex system of computer hardware that seems to have power on its own. The feeling that most users have of not fully mastering the medium, is crucial to their experience of working with the texts. For example, if reading online texts, they may be forced to helplessly realise that the text they were using is suddenly inaccessible.

Furthermore, hyperfiction can be said to have a less stable content than print literature because it often has a constantly changing centre of narration. It is easier for hypertext authors to use the disruption between each lexia to shift context abruptly and the more autonomous state of each lexia produces many brief centres of narration. A new place or character can suddenly become central in a given lexia, and be insignificant in the next. The reader cannot assume a steady and causal story line and read with a good hunch about how the story will develop and often he cannot be as certain what the main elements of the story are.

The actual impact that the increased instability of the electronic text has on the reader is very difficult to assess. One could compare the electronic reading experience with looking at sand sculptures or words written in sand, because the awareness that it will probably be destroyed as new technology makes it obsolete and links begin to fail contributes to the experience. The observer will often think that it is a pity that it will be erased after all that work and that it should be preserved for more people to see it. Perhaps the viewer for a brief moment feels an urge to save it from destruction. This urge can encourage a more passionate and immediate experience, because it is tied to fragile and transient artworks. Futhermore, the reader's expectations as to how the plot will develop will probably become less precise. The unfamiliarity of this medium will make it all

more unpredictable and he cannot relax his 'cognitive muscles' (Birkerts) and drift along with the plot as easily as in print literature.

Open text

Hyperfiction is often literally open, that is, without a clear start and end point. The reader stops reading simply when he does not feel like reading it anymore, if the text loops too much, or if it simply becomes too enigmatic and frustrating.

There is a (poststructuralist) consensus among most hypertext theorists and writers (such as Joyce, and Moulthrop) that there should not be any conventional beginning and ending in hypertext. The argument goes that designated beginnings and endings strengthen restrictive enlightenment "virtues" of teleological progression, binary thinking and linearity. In Landow's words "The concepts (and experiences) of beginning and ending imply linearity" (Landow, 1997, p. 77). Furthermore, borders like a designated "beginning" and "end" help to uphold the illusion that the autonomous, original artwork exists independently of other works. They situate the reader in a hierarchy and works against a "healthy" awareness of the fact that all texts are connected in some way. Furthermore, if there are no borders it lets the reader decide when he thinks the hyperfiction is finished, which may however leave him with the feeling that it is unresolved. Therefore, the inclusion of a starting- and endpoint might not be a bad idea, conventional or not, because it may be the very factor that encloses and resolves the reading experience crucially for readers.

A more pronounced intertextuality

Hypertext can easily and seamlessly direct the reader to other texts in a way that books cannot. If a passage in a hyperfiction alludes to something in another story, then the hypertext writer can link the allusion to the actual piece in the other story and perhaps also to more information about it. This provides the reader with a clear sense of how the text is made up in interplay with other texts, but it also limits his own imaginative perception of implicit connections because he focuses on the explicit connections made by the author.

Stronger element of disorientation

Multilinearity, multivocality and the rapidly changing contexts of diverse lexias often make hypertext reading confusing to a mind accustomed to one-way reading in print. Furthermore, the reader often has no idea how far into the hypertext he is and these new aspects of the reading experience may be undesirable to some readers. Landow observes, "the neophyte or inexperienced reader finds unpleasantly confusing materials that more expert readers find a source of pleasure" (Landow 1997, p. 117). The structuralist theorists' belief is that the confusion and lack of smooth coherence may make the experienced reader pause and consider the contexts and implications surrounding his reading. He becomes more detached and alienated and thus more critical towards the text and its attempts to create illusions and "truths".

Hypertext's properties may make it perfect for practising associative, multicursal writing, but the reader must to some extent be allowed to stay on top of the constant temporal and spatial changes or a breakdown of meaning will happen. Readers may end up chasing blindly around the text, looking for new lexias, some plot-related information, or the

ending, instead of appreciating the literary qualities of the writing. A certain amount of disorientation may indeed make readers pause and reflect on extra- and meta-textual issues, but too much of it and they get lost, bored and give up. The "beneficial" confusion should be imbedded in a narrative superstructure helping to prevent the experience from becoming too chaotic with no consistent movement in any direction whatsoever.

Multivocality

The reader of hyperfiction will often experience a blurring of the identity of who is narrating or which character is speaking. The mix of lexias with different points of view, time and space, may make identities vague and the reading experience very focused on trying to determine who says what. Especially hyperfictions with several authors, like *The Unknown*, make it very difficult to determine who is narrating what. The lexias signal a possible shift in time and place, making it less necessary for the author to describe transitions very clearly in words. This vagueness of identity decreases the author's authority, because his voice does not seem clear and consistent.

Lack of captivating pull

This may not necessarily be a general characteristic of hypertext, as it may just be the severe lack of gripping, fast-moving hypertext stories that has led to the almost general assumption that it is inherently anti-immersive. Theorisers, notably Mark Bernstein, the theoriser and director of the CD-based hypertext publishing company Eastgate Systems, and David Miall, tend to believe that links cut any continuous and coherent storyline to pieces, along with any immersion. As a contrast to hypertext's aesthetics, Mark Bernstein uses TV, radio and cinema as instances of what he calls immersive media[5]. Like many other enthusiastic hypertext theorists, Bernstein does not seem to view the supposed anti-immersive qualities of hypertext as a problem. The enthusiasts' view of immersion has also been noticed by the theorist Lisbeth Klastrup:

To them perceptual immersion - understood as the kind of reading in which the reader lets himself be absorbed completely by the text (i.e. the fictional universe or the 'storyworld' rendered) - seems to be equal to a submission to the authority of the 'master'-text, hence preventing a genuinely liberating and interactive reading from taking place.

(Klastrup, 1997)

Bolter, Landow, Bernstein, Joyce, Moulthrop and other theorists appear to value intellectual involvement with a hyperfiction over an emotional one. They adhere to the poststructuralist ideal of maintaining a critical distance to the discourse, so that its attempts to impose its truth on the reader will not succeed.

Less authorial power? Liberation of reader?

The opposition to the early theorists' somewhat unsubstantiated claims of hypertext's liberation of the reader is now fairly strong in the hypertext community of theorisers and writers.

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[5] online essay at http://www.eastgate.com/HypertextNow/archives/Attention.html.

[…] much of the early hypertext theory has focused on the idea of hypertext as a subject versus actual hypertext works. Thus, much of this early hypertext theory overstated the liberatory aspects of hypertext as a way to differentiate it from past media while overlooking ways that hypertexts constrain readers.

(Higgason, 1999)

Whether the reader experiences increased freedom in hypertext is debatable. Of course there are more possible paths of reading in hypertext, but who says that the book reader always reads linearly, word by word? Most readers probably practise what Barthes called tmesis (1975, p. 10-11) – skipping words, paragraphs or pages, going back to check a passage again, perusing etc. Rules and borders may seem looser in hypertext, but they can also be perceived as being even tighter. The reader cannot turn to a certain passage as easily as in a book and in most hyperfiction the author dictates what paths the reader may take in which order, except in the few hyperfictions like *The Unknown*, that offer an overview with links to all the links in the story.

It is therefore not necessarily true that hypertext liberates us as readers. It offers us new ways of reading, but it also limits some reading processes connected with book reading. In Miall's essay *Trivialising or Liberating? The Limitations of Hypertext Theorising* (1999) he comments on Jay David Bolter's description of Derrida's *Glas* as a hypertext ahead of its time. In *Glas* Derrida divided the page into two columns: one with extracts from and comments on Hegel and the opposite one with writing by Genet and comments on him. Bolter, as cited by Miall, then describes how the reader can scan the text and see how "connections seem to be there, as words and sentence fragments refer the reader back and forth between Hegel and Genet" (1995, p. 116). Bolter claims that hypertext is the perfect medium for a text like *Glas*. He believes "any relationships between textual elements can float to the surface" (Bolter, 1995, p. 117). However, as Miall observes, once the links are specified they limit the reader's inner interaction with the text. Miall puts it a little too categorically: "the infinite possibilities of response by each reader are limited to the few links prepared by the hypertext designer" (Miall, *Trivializing,* p. 162). It seems plausible that some readers are capable of reading the text on the screen without letting the links "get to them". They may read the text as traditional text, make their own inferences and then use the added dimension that links bring to it. The links should look inconspicuous, in order to give the reader peace to make his own connections as well. Perhaps it would be an idea to erase the line under links and just leave them in a slightly different shade of colour, in order to make them more discrete.

Reader freedom can be many things, for instance it can be freedom to navigate, to imagine, to co-write. The question of reader freedom can basically be divided into *inner* and *outer* freedom. The traditional *inner* freedom to fantasise appears to be decreased while the *outer* one is increased. Reader freedom grows through the possibility of choosing between many paths, but at the same time it decreases with the restriction they put on affective processes. It seems that unaffected hyperfictions like *The Unknown* utilises the medium's traits very well. It is not the type of text that often attempts to speak earnestly to the reader's emotions and therefore it is possible to enjoy both the linking and the plot without feeling that an emotional dimension of the text is ruined. The many lyrical and slow paced, "deep" hypertexts are perhaps not very well suited for an electronic environment that seems to invite a fast paced, grand scale kind of reading.

Spatial reading: linked signs have an extra level of signifying

Most reading of print narratives is about looking *through* the words (see Lanham, 1989), because the signs are not designed to attract attention to themselves. Printed signs normally do not have the

level of iconic value that linked signs in hypertext have. Thus, instead of just looking *through* it, the reader must also look *at* the linked signs because they represent an extra level of meaning, a function in themselves. This can produce a reading pattern interchanging between immersion and confrontation with the links' iconic significance.

> Readers move back and forth between confronting the signs (reading with a critical distance) and allowing themselves to be absorbed into that imagined world.

(Bolter, Writing spaces, 1995, p.228)

Hypertext Writing Techniques

In the following, a description of writing techniques connected with the use of linking, found at Eastgate's homepage[6], constitutes the basis for this selection of the most interesting and relevant new writing possibilities in the hypertext medium.

The cycle

In hypertext, recurrence is often not a flaw but can be an important writing technique. Some hypertexts lead the reader through the same lexias repeatedly in order to make a thematic point. Most online hypertexts change the colour of already used links to prevent the reading from becoming too repetitive and monotonous. Nevertheless, it may bring interesting aesthetic effects if a link leads back to a previously visited lexia, which may have gained a new meaning, now that more of the story is known. Repetition can also be used to emphasise key lexias that the author wants the reader to notice, like Pratik Kanjilal does in *The Buddha Smiled*, where he makes a link lead back to the already visited /spiral/ lexia. It may, however, be a strain on the reader's patience, as it is rather tiring to be shown the same words repeatedly.

(Michael) Joyce's cycle

Here the reader may be returned to not just one lexia, but a string of previously traversed scenes. The cycle is then broken and the reader continues along a new path. The string of situations may gain a new significance the second time around. This happens in *Afternoon: A Story*, Michael Joyce's (1987) classic hypertext. These are its opening lines:

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…

These lines create a gloomy atmosphere the first time they are encountered, but when the lines appear later they suddenly seem even gloomier. We now know that the car they are walking towards may actually be the wreck of the narrator's ex-wife's car. The ominous atmosphere thus

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[6] At www.eastgate.com/patterns/Patterns.html.

assumes new meaning and the technique thus fits in well with poststructuralist ideas with its undermining of the notion that any stable truth exists.

The counterpoint

This technique is a variation of different voices that supplement or contradict each other. Often it is done by devoting some lexias to one character's voice and others solely to another character. This way the story is told through dialogue, in which the different narrators in the lexias supplement or contradict each other. As Bernstein remarks, this technique has for example been used in *Forward Anywhere*, an online hypertext, which is composed of interchanging emails from two characters. It can induce a sense of eavesdropping on the characters and the whole hypertext is put in a different context than if seems filtered through a narrator. Counterpoint can thus provide immediacy and variation in a hypertext.

The Unknown uses counterpoint very often when pretending to let other people comment on The Unknown and their text. For example, their agent, 'Marla' comments on the group and their writings and this way the reader feels that he gets a third-person, objective account of what they are really like. This strengthens its documentary quality and adds depth and colour to the reading experience. The lexia entitled *Marla, in her own words*, is apparently a look at them from the outside:

It was never easy to manage their raw talent. It would have been far easier to manage a raw squid. Talent is always difficult, and they had a lot of that, and that. They were erratic. They were a challenge. They were intellectuals, they were dynamic, and they excited me. […] They were disorganized, barely in control. They had too many ideas and not enough time. So I made their arrangements. I magnified them. I broadcast them. I got them readings and interviews and appointments and shows.

(/Marla/, 1998)

Her observations support their own descriptions of rough, carefree and arrogant behaviour and strengthen the realistic feel of the story. She could also have contradicted the image they give of themselves which would give the reader even more trouble with discerning how much of what The Unknown say about themselves is true.

The neighbourhood

It is important to have a distinct visual design in lexias that are connected in some way. This will show the reader that they all belong to the same 'neighbourhood'. If lexias within a story have completely different designs, then the reader will be inclined to believe that they belong to different contexts. *The Unknown* is a good example of a hypertext that has particular designs for each kind of lexia. Each lexia has a certain frame colour, according to the nature of its content. Thus, the story lexias have a red frame, the metafictional ruminations have a purple one, the documentary lexias have a blue one, etc. All the threads but "Press" in the navigation bar lead to lexias that all have the same navigation bar at the bottom and the same design, showing the reader that all of this is in the same overall context/neighbourhood of *the Unknown*.

The split/join

Here the writer lets a thread divide into two different threads for a while, before they join again by leading to the same lexia. The reader can thus potentially experience two different stories, dependent on which string of events he chooses. The consequence of the choice can be clearly stated, like in "be your own hero" stories where a choice could be "do you want to <u>sleep</u> or <u>go to the party</u>?" In order to keep the number of endings down, the splits will have to join often, but there can of course also be splits that trail off to a separate conclusion.

The *Rashomon* variant of the split is when the reader, after choosing one of a number of links in a lexia is lead through a sequence of lexias and then returned to that same lexia. When he then chooses another link he is led through a new string of lexias and back to the central lexia again. Thus he encounters new lexias every time, which puts the central lexia in a new light every time. He is caught in a mixture of a cycle and a split/join and can only escape doing the same cycles repeatedly (if in a HTML environment) by going back from that central lexia to the one preceding it.

The missing link

This technique could also have been called 'the missing lexia'. It happens when there are allusions, explicit or through iteration and ellipsis, to some particular scene which is nowhere to be found in the hypertext. Often, the links that look as if they will lead to this particular scene lead to other lexias surrounding the central issue. It is a very good way to heighten suspense and activate readers' imagination.

The Unknown uses it in a situation where there is much talk of an apparently very serious accident, whose beginning and effect are described but the actual description of the accident is nowhere to be found.

[…] that is how I witnessed <u>William's near-fatal, coma-inducing, bungie jumping accident</u> in the Sierra Nevadas, at the Royal Gorge. It brings me pain even to think about it now.

<p align="right">(/bungie/, 1998, my emphasis)</p>

The link, underlined, makes the reader expect that it will lead to a description of this jump, and it does lead to the jumping preparations at the gorge, but the lexia ends with the linked sentence "Lets do it" that leads to a scene where one of the narrators is talking to William who is in a coma. It is a very cinematic effect, as if there is a cut just as he jumps to a scene where he is lying in a hospital bed. The reader is looking for the scene depicting the accident, but it is nowhere to be found and he must then imagine what actually happened.

It should be clear by now, that hyperfiction has developed into a medium that offers rich possibilities for creating interesting reading experiences. There are more variables than in print literature, because the medium offers many ways of presentation and because so few conventions exist. Thus, there are many more questions that the writer must ask himself in addition to those connected with putting the right words in the right order. The reader, likewise, must broaden his interpretive range for new ways of literary signification and learn to notice subtle meanings implied in the use of linking and other formal elements.

Hyperfiction Conventions: Desirable or not?

In time, the refining of hyperfiction poetics will hopefully help making the discourse of the art form as intricate and sophisticated as film. When we watch films we have now learned to notice tiny irregularities, because we know the conventions for film narratives so well. It is thus important to develop a fairly stable poetics of hypertext, in order to have something to use as background for meaning making through either breaking with or following this poetics. Furthermore, more defined conventions within hyperfiction would also strengthen the appeal to a wider audience.

Nevertheless, some theorists find this development undesirable because they believe that it is the instability and ambiguity of hypertext that provide its uniqueness. But it is unlikely that hypertext's conventions will ever become as powerful as those of print literature or film because its more open structure encourages a more diverse mix of voices, genres and formal styles. In such a fluctuating medium it is harder for any firm rules of presentation and meaning making to develop. But whether or not hyperfiction should have more stability or not is one of the many questions that have been disputed among theorists through some 15 years. The following chapter will introduce some of these questions in order to prepare the reader for a discussion of the present state of hyperfiction and the influence that hypertext theory has had on it

Chapter 2

> Especially, I wish to challenge the recurrent practice of applying the theories of literary criticism to a new empirical field, seemingly without any reassessment of the terms and concepts involved […] A related, but reverse problem is the tendency to describe the new text media as radically different from the old, with attributes solely determined by the material technology of the medium.
>
> - Rune Aarseth, *Cybertext*, p. 14 (1997)

An Introduction to Dominant Issues in Ruling Hypertext Theory

As mentioned in the introduction, hypertext theorists have been divided into to two main opposing camps: sceptics (reader-oriented) and enthusiasts (theory-oriented). These two groups have had a tendency to talk past each other with their fundamentally differing views of the capabilities and effects of traditional literature and hypertext. This chapter discusses some of the main concepts and issues in order to give an impression of the general debate and to prepare the reader for the more specific discussion of hypertext theory's influence on hyperfiction in the following chapter.
The issues to be described in this chapter include:

- How the reader and the act of reading should be characterised.
- What to think of the lack of reader interest in hyperfiction.
- The running competition between hyperfiction and the book.

The Reader and Reading

Hypertext theory has through the last 15 years or so scrutinised many aspects of hypertext reading and writing. In this discussion, the way the fundamental traits of the reader and reading are represented seems to be the most disputed point. Obviously it is difficult to say anything in general about reading processes, as they vary considerably from reader to reader. Often there are wildly diverging interpretations of the same literary piece, as seen in classroom discussions of a text. Generally, advocates and detractors regard readers in very different ways. Sven Birkerts, the archenemy of electronic literature, sees hypertext as a dead end, while many hypertext writers and theorists, view it as nothing less than the long-awaited liberation of the reader. Hypertext sceptics, especially David Miall (see Miall 1989, 1996, 1997), believe that the emotional dimension constitute an essential part of reading. They maintain that these inherent and affective reading habits are disrupted by hypertext, leaving only a superficial and analytical reading experience. Enthusiasts, on the other hand, believe that the traditional reading habits are discarded and replaced with new ones when readers are confronted by hypertext. They generally tend to view the reader as a 'tabula rasa', a blank surface on which new habits can be inscribed and they also tend to treat literature reading processes as equal to those of information processing. In short, sceptics like Miall and Birkerts believe that emotions and idiosyncratic habits constitute a very large part of reading, while enthusiasts tend to view it as mainly cognitive and logical processes. But, as said, it is impossible to say anything definite in this matter.

Apart from the discussion of what the fundamental traits of reading are, there has also been some dispute whether hyperfiction reading is multilinear or not. Rune Aarseth (Cybertext, 1997) identifies a central misunderstanding of the concept of reading hyperfiction between those who have experienced electronic narratives and those who have not.

Why is the variable expression of the nonlinear text so easily mistaken for the semantic ambiguity of the linear text?

(Aarseth, 1997)

When hypertext theorisers speak of multilinearity they focus on what is being read *from* – the total field of presented paths, while those not as familiar with hyperfictions tend to focus narrowly on what is actually read. Thus, hypertext theorisers also take all the rejected paths and the awareness of these unexplored paths' existence into consideration when assessing the hypertext reading experience. In contrast, theorisers sceptical towards hyperfiction do not see the hypertext reading experience as being multilinear because the reader, strictly speaking, is of course only able to follow one line at a time. But hyperfiction theorisers are right to speak of a multilinear reading experience in hyperfiction, because the many paths not taken influence the reader's thoughts with their potential clues to the meaning of the story.

Multilinear reading is closely connected to the concept of interaction. Ruling hypertext theory habitually calls hyperfiction reading 'interactive'. Strictly speaking this is a somewhat exaggerated term to use for the hyperfiction experience. But in media discussions in general, the word 'interactive' has gained a very broad meaning. Nevertheless, this broad meaning seems sometimes to imbue hyperfiction with more power than it actually possesses, especially when it is referred to as 'interactive fiction'. Janet Murray, for example, writes in her book *Hypertext*, without explaining what she means by 'interactive', that "When writers use hypertext to produce a fictional narrative, the result is a new literary form: interactive hyperfiction." (1995: 82). Interaction is a very difficult

concept to work with as it carries so many meanings. Enthusiasts see hypertext reading as involving more interaction than print reading because it obviously offers added possibilities for the reader to explicitly choose where to go next. Sceptics see book reading as being just as, or even more, interactive, because the mind of the reader is completely free to interact with that of the author.

J. Yellowlees Douglas (2000, p. 43) cites a very comprehensive definition of interaction developed by Andy Lippman of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab. Full interaction, according to this definition, only takes place in a face-to-face conversation between humans. Lippman believes true interactivity is "mutual and simultaneous activity on the part of two participants, usually working toward some goal, but not necessarily" (Douglas, 2000, p. 42). Apart from this, interaction must be "mutual and simultaneous" (Douglas, 2000, p.43).

According to this definition, hyperfiction reading is not interactive. Hyperfictions can, despite enthusiasts' indiscriminate use of the term, only aspire to coming close to full interaction. Aarseth is very critical of the use of the term in hypertext theory and believes that it

> connotes various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalized media, while denoting nothing. Its ideological implication, however, is clear enough: that humans and machines are equal partners of communication. […] To declare a system interactive is to endorse it with a magic power.
>
> (*Cybertext*, p. 48)"

The term 'interactive' in connection with hyperfiction must therefore merely be taken to mean that the reader must make physical inputs and that is fair enough as long as that meaning is understood, but some theorists tend to exaggerate this feature. Some even claim that hyperfiction reading make the reader's inner cognitive and affective interaction literal. Ilana Snyder advocates the "literal interaction" view of hyperfiction reading in her book *Hypertext* (1997) when comparing it with the active kind of reading that reader-response theory has described through the last three decades:

> What readers actually do when they move around in a hypertext web embodies many of the key concepts of reader-response criticism […] readers, […] respond actively to the words on the page, and it is their responses rather than authorial intentions, which determine the text.
>
> (1996, p. 69-70)

Similarly, Bolter, in the usual all-out celebratory fashion characterising many hypertext enthusiasts, proclaims that

> What was only figuratively true in the case of print, becomes literally true […] The new medium reifies the metaphor of reader-response, for the reader participates in the making of the text as a sequence of words…There is no single univocal text apart from the reader; the author writes a set of potential texts, from which the reader chooses.
>
> (1991, p. 158)

It is of course a gross simplification to compare the complex cognitive processes when reading print literature to the much more conscious act of clicking electronic links. Actually, as Miall's criticism of established hypertext theory indicate, empirical studies (Miall 1989a, 1994) based on reader-response theory show that processes of reading complex literature are more intricate than the information processing models used by ruling hypertext theory.

Wolfgang Iser[7] illustrates how book reading is an active and complicated interaction between author and reader. The filling in of gaps is different with every act of reading, because 'the reading process always involves reading the text through a perspective that is continually on the move' (Iser 1980: 56). In Isers words:

The literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realisation of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realised, and furthermore the realisation is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader… The convergence of the text and the reader brings the literary work into existence.

(1980, p. 50)

In all events, Isers words should be enough to prove that we will probably never be able to generalise about reading, and thus theorists should be more careful with making grand claims about it.

Only Few Readers of Hyperfiction

The uncompromising approach of hypertext writers and theorists has ensured that those who read it are the few who are willing to make an effort to learn to appreciate it and who agree that it should mainly be about breaking down traditional literary conventions. The following citation from The New York Times illustrates most hyperfiction enthusiasts' reaction to the lack of reader interest in contemporary hypertext.

People who create hypertext believe that mainstream audiences will eventually appreciate their work. But for now, they consider […] criticism a necessary accompaniment to the cutting edge, to the creation of art for art's sake. "We shouldn't worry about being unread," said Diane Greco, a hypertext author who is working toward a doctorate in the history of science and technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

(/presskit/nyt/)

These hyperfiction authors believe that readers will learn how to appreciate the art form as they experience more of it. In order to provide an example that shows that it is indeed possible to teach people new decoding competences, the enthusiasts sometimes refer to the way film art developed. Many believe that hypertext art should focus on developing its own aesthetic traits in the same manner as film. However, the film business was strongly dependent on the audience while hypertext art on the Internet does not have to sell any tickets. One of the reasons why the development of film art turned out so successful is probably because it was forced to put first priority on pleasing the audience and then try to develop new aesthetics within the commercial constraints. Furthermore, film art developed very gradually indeed from merely mimicking theatre plays into highly intricate narratives that utilise the particular strengths of the medium. Thus, roughly over a period of thirty years, audiences were eased into this new form of storytelling and it thus proves that it is possible to teach audiences new interpretation competences, but that it must happen very gradually indeed. It seems, by comparison, that hyperfiction authors in general have tended to impose a change on their readers, which is too radical. Gene Ashe comments on this problem in his piece on why hyperfiction should look more towards theories of business:

If a market participant must make a significant paradigm shift in his thinking to accept an innovative product, then the buyers will probably be those on the cutting edge. […] when does "change" require a major paradigm shift in thinking and when does it require "not being stupid?" This truly is a judgement call. […] The real point here is that a micro-change helps to promote mass acceptance within a market.

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[7] As cited by in Snyder 1996, p. 70.

Hyperfiction has still a long way to go before it achieves 'mass acceptance'. A large, mainstream hyperfiction like *The Unknown* has about 2,900 visitors a month at the moment (December 2001), and about 7,700 people visited it each month in the 3 months from December 1999 to March 2000[8]. These numbers are hard to interpret, because there are so many types of visits. Some stay long, others came there by mistake and leave right away, others return repeatedly, etc. It is thus fair to say that hyperfiction in general has not gained any significant popularity yet.

Readers' 'upbringing' within traditional literary conventions is undoubtedly one reason why some find it hard to adjust to hypertext. It can be hard to appreciate the increased uncertainty and intellectual workload. Hyperfiction's lack of popularity, has led the hypertext poet Robert Kendall to argue that the hypertext medium is simply not suited to hyperfiction, but more to hyperpoetry. The combination of connected fragments and the isolation within lexias may bring forth a tension and immediacy that strengthens the power of the individual words. In the words of Catherine Hayles:

Other writers such as Robert Kendall argue that these problems [of making it work] indicate that electronic hypertexts may be more suited to poetry rather than fiction - a proposition that speaks to the ground-breaking work being done in electronic poetry but that does nothing to discourage fiction writers from pursuing their craft in this medium as well.

(Hayles, 1999)

As Hayles herself says, this should not discourage fiction writers from trying to make it work. It is premature to blame the lack of readers for the hyperfictions written so far. There have been written far too few (if any) sufficiently compelling hyperfictions to pass judgment on the whole form as being inherently anti-narrative. We need more hyperfictions that at least *try* to tell a fascinating story, before we pass that judgement.

Hyperfiction vs. the Book

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Sven Birkerts describes the pleasures that books can bring and criticises electronic literature for, among other things, producing a superficial reading experience. The elusive and unstable nature of the electronic word as well as the superficial and draft-like flexibility of hypertext prevent the reader from entering a 'realm of duration' (Birkerts' term for immersion). The realm of duration is a feeling of consistency and unity and the dissolution of time into continuous story, offered by the printed fictions. He believes that the lack of any firm guidance by an author erases any meditative space for the reader. This happens because, as quoted by Lisbeth Klastrup (1997), the reader 'goes to work' to be 'subjected to the creative will of another' (Birkerts 1994: 162-163). And when he cannot meet this Other (the author) in hyperfiction, he feels utterly alone and unsatisfied, as all he meets is himself. There is also a general suspicion among sceptics that the electronic medium weakens both the quality and presence of the words' beauty, because it seems to work against the calmness and carefulness that is required when creating and reading beautiful writing. Also, the reasoning of the reader may go: when lexias remain unseen because I choose another path and the author knows this, why would he then strive to make each lexia perfect? Harbouring these suspicions, Birkerts and others find it hard to gain the level of enjoyment from

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[8] Statistics located at www.unknownhypertext.com/stats/ and www.unknownhypertext.com/stats00/

hypertext that they get from books. Here is Birkerts on the bliss of reading, as quoted by Klastrup (1997).

Literature holds meaning not as a content that can be abstracted and summarized, but as experience. It is a participatory arena. Through the process of reading we slip out of customary time orientation, marked by the distractedness and surficiality, into the realm of duration. Only in the duration state is experience present as meaning.

(Birkerts, p. 31-32, 1994)

From the outset it seems impossible for hypertext to reach the kind of immersion Birkerts praises, but traditional immersion is not what it should strive for anyway. In hyperfiction, the experience of immersion is of a different kind and cannot be compared with that of book reading. It is simply not as deep, long lasting and seamless. It does not come as a result of a long, gradually building suspense, but rather during pockets of captivating writing in certain lexias.

The goal of passive reading is to forget oneself by identifying with the narrative world presented. In this sense passive reading is antireading, since true reading is an encounter with signs in which the reader continually asserts (and repeatedly loses) his or her independence of the text.

(Bolter, 1995, 229, emphasis mine)

The many short units of meaning encourage a more fragmented reading experience, and if the passage bores the reader or demands too much work, he just clicks a link and reads another lexia. The new generations of readers will not be as tied down by book reading habits, but will be more experienced with the kind of discourse offered by TV, computer games and hypertext. Children today have a much broader range of interpretation competences, so they will be more adept at appreciating the more unsettling and disorienting hyperfictions that most hypertext enthusiasts dream of. But, considering the competition from other media, they will also demand a strong plot and much suspense in order to stay entertained. Therefore, writers will have to be better at utilising the features of hypertext and construct more appealing narratives. In particular, hyperfiction writers should try to use links as more than just connections. They should "write between the lines" with them in order to colour the meaning of the lexias and to create implicit meanings. In short, links should be used as skilfully as the cut in film. The similarity of these two basic elements of hyperfiction and film is sometimes commented on, here by an unidentified writer in an Italian Web zine:

As an amateur hypertext writer I feel like I am a movie editor more than a traditional writer, especially when I organize links between pages […]

(*The Unknown*, /presskit/kunginterview/)

Linking should become just as sophisticated and subtle a craft as editing in films. The editing of a film is just as important as the shooting of it in the production of meaning and linking should have the same high priority.

Sven Birkerts criticises everything about hypertext that seem to threaten the traditional, immersive reading experience. In *The Gutenberg Elegies* he writes that the screen and mouse bring technological alienation, ruining the pleasure of reading fiction. He thus tends to commit the 'functional fallacy' (Miall[9]), equating the medium with its effect, just as his opponents. His complaint seems unwarranted for, as many people easily immerse themselves in other kinds of

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[9] Mentioned at www.ualberta.ca/~dmiall/hyperead/function.htm.

entertainment on the computer and happily read long articles, essays etc. on the Internet. To blame the hypertext hardware for its tendency to alienate the reader is to say that computers by definition preclude any immersion. In an online essay (Birkerts, 1999) describes his experiences with reading traditional literature presented on the Rocket eBook and the Softbook. These are two small, portable electronic devices that store literature, which is presented on a little screen. They do not present hyperfiction, but his description of what reading on a screen does to the reading process is still relevant for this description of how differently theorists view reading in the electronic medium.

There was a disappearance of context. His sense of how much he had read and how much yet to read was weakened. There was an indicator, showing where he had gotten to in the story, but it still was not enough to situate him as firmly in the story as the pages of a book. He believes that a firm awareness of how much one has left to read is important for what he calls the "cognitive muscles" (Birkerts, 1999). The knowledge of the position and distance to the goal is one of the factors that makes the reader relax and gives him an important clue to guessing plot elements. We all know that there is a huge difference if one of the "good guys" gets murdered in the beginning or in the end. If it happens in the beginning we expect his death to trigger an investigation, vengeance, etc, if it happens in the end we may form schemata that points towards a tragedy. This possibility is weakened when literature is multilinear and on a screen, but this is only a bad thing to readers who, like Birkerts, require a clear and stable frame for their reading. In contrast, the growing group of more open readers who prefer a more surprising and less determined reading environment will enjoy that it widens the field of plot possibilities.

Birkerts also experienced what he calls the "Alzheimer effect". The text-piece isolated on the screen attracted all attention and erased the impression of the pieces preceding it. This meant a lack of depth, a dreamlike experience which made it all too superficial for Birkerts. Others may instead find the increased focus on isolated sections more rewarding because each word, sentence and paragraph is exhibited more directly, in their own right, rather than merely filling out a causal function, as a step towards the conclusion. A paragraph can thus not just be reduced to its essential function in the story, but seems to gain an extra dimension by its reference to itself. Birkerts does not see this, but concludes that all these disrupting factors create a reading that is too "disturbed" to provide any deep reader involvement.

In contrast to Birkerts and illustrating how differently readers react to literature on a screen, Alvin Lu reported "once you get past the initial unease of reading off a computer screen, the trappings fade away and once again you're transported back to the familiar space of the mind's eye" (Lu, 497). But extremely inner-directed readers like Birkerts will probably never adopt the new reading medium in contrast to more other-directed readers who will make an effort to give it a chance and focus on the good things about reading electronic literature. One of the ultra other-directed theorists who tries (too) hard to convince others (and himself?) that hypertext literature provides better reading experiences than print literature is Robert Coover, esteemed author and influential advocate of experimental hypertext. Here he is talking nostalgically of the "classical" hypertext that was mainly written from the mid 80's to the early 90's. It was published on diskette or CD-Rom and the authors were very idealistic, experimenting with the art form, trying to develop a form that utilises the medium perfectly.

[…] once we got used to it, there was no reason we could not achieve that sort of focused deeply imagined, "lost" reading experience we so treasured in books – finding, as the hyperpoet Stephanie Strickland has said, "an individualised meditative space, of the kind that supports mental doodling, rest, quiet exploration in a safe space, as books were wont to give us. […]

One […] is drawn ever deeper, until clicking the mouse is as unconscious an act as turning a page, and much less constraining, more compelling.

(Coover, 2000)

The contrasting experiences of hyperfiction illustrate all too well how important readers' predisposition towards it is. Coover teaches hyperfiction writing and is well versed in the theoretical implications surrounding it, while Birkerts is of the old school - a lover of traditional literature and hostile towards hyperfiction. They both seem to be too extreme in their views: Coover is determined to distinguish hyperfiction as much as possible from book literature, encouraging experimentation and ignoring the risk of alienating readers. Birkerts basically wants it to provide the same experiences as book reading.

Thus, there are strong attempts to pull hyperfiction in various theoretical directions, but it seems that this is not really generating many new ideas of interest to the developers of more widely appealing hyperfictions. The more anarchic and independent market forces of the Internet are probably better at shaping a kind of hyperfiction that is more in touch with readers' wants. The Internet has the atmosphere of the marketplace where attracting attention is important, but it also offers cheap production and publishing opportunities, making it unimportant money wise for hyperfiction writers whether many people read it or not. The Internet's popularising effect on it may not be a bad thing, because it may produce a less serious approach to writing hyperfiction and add much needed elements of humour and suspense. The existing online magazines[10] can maintain a high quality of the online hyperfictions by having qualified editors critiquing and picking out worthwhile works. Also, a division into two main forms could be done, separating hyperfictions that are almost only based on words with only a few images and sounds (like *The Unknown*) from those that are based more heavily on multimedia (like *Rice*, the other winner of the alt-X- hypertext competition 1998). Online magazines could also have different kinds of content. Some could be aimed at highbrow readers, while others could carry more mainstream hyperfictions. Thus, the Internet seems to promise a much more diverse field of hyperfictions, appealing to different reader types. Hopefully more practically oriented Internet hyperfiction authors will direct the development of them away from the either/or way (no book aesthetics, only uniquely hyperfiction ones) towards a more nuanced one where the useful values of both art forms are combined into one. Furthermore, as more and more hyperfictions crop up on the Internet, readers and authors can see what seems to work in the medium and what not, and this way the Internet promises to loosen the control of literary theory and let the art form develop more through trial and error.

Lessons Learned

Books and hyperfiction are both predominantly based on words, but the way they present their contents is fundamentally different. As mentioned, the question for hypertext is not just if it can match literature (as Jakob Nielsen, the usability expert, says "page turning remains a bad interface"[11]), but how it can go beyond the experiences offered by it and produce hitherto unknown variants of aesthetic experience while still preserving some connection to traditional storytelling conventions. Theorists need to check their ideological rhetoric, take the average reader more into consideration and more often base their conclusions on empirical studies, because it is fairly easy to

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[10] Like *Hyperizons* at www.duke.edu/~mshumate/hyperfic.html
[11] at www.useit.com/alertbox/980726.html

sense if hyperfiction elements work or not. All writing attempts enable other hypertext writers to pick out features that work. Indeed, we need less theory and more writing.

Chapter 3

> Among deconstructive literary critics, a favourite demonstration is to invert [the standard hierarchical opposition of literature / criticism] so as to make criticism primary and literature secondary, and then [to assert] that criticism is a species of literature, and that literature is a species of criticism.
>
> M. H. Abrams A Glossary of Literary Terms, p. 227 (1993)

<u>Hypertext Theory's (Poststructuralist) Idealism</u>

Having introduced the reader to main issues and elements of hypertext in the preceding two chapters, I will now discuss the essentialist virus of ruling hypertext theory – the widespread conviction that the first priority when writing hypertext stories or poetry is to implement poststructuralist principles in practice and find use for the (poststructuralist), 'unique traits' of the medium. Then reader response theories of Umberto Eco will provide the theoretical framework, when showing how the widespread and heavy influence of poststructuralist aesthetics and the obsession with its 'unique traits' has entailed a very narrow definition of the 'model reader' (Eco) in the two hyperfictions in question and in other hyperfictions similar to them. Due to the narrow definition of the model reader this kind of hyperfiction is virtually unreadable for many people.

But I will first provide a brief outline of the acknowledged scholar M. H. Abrams' very broad description of poststructuralist theory in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (p. 259-262). He has attempted to boil the most general ideas of poststructuralist theory down to four main points, which makes it very useful for this short introduction of one of the theoretical schools that has dominated literary theory through the last 30 years. These fundamental ideas are echoed repeatedly in hypertext theory, for instance in the essays by Slatin, Moulthrop, Harpold, and Dickey in *Hypermedia and Literary Studies* (Delany, 1994) and, notably, in Landow's *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology.* This list is followed by a discussion of the fundamental paradox of an art form that most ruling theorists (Bernstein, Moulthrop, Bolter and Landow) believe has inherent poststructuralist and alienating qualities, but also needs to appeal to a wider audience to ensure a more balanced and varied development and range of inputs.

1. There is a primacy of theory over text. A text can always be deconstructed, subverting its intended meanings. Poststructuralist theory is hostile to customary ways of thinking and fixed assumptions and conventions.
2. It wishes to decentre the subject and all notions of a central entity that the artwork centres around. There can never be an author who masters signifiers, as they will always be free

and unstable. The artist is merely a "site traversed by ruling cultural constructs and discursive formations of a given era" (Abrams, 1993).

3. There is no reader, but only readings, and there is no discrete "work", but only interplay of text. The text contains a network of meanings and is in a network with other texts. All boundaries, like for example those between genres, are merely subjective constructs. The text should therefore shed all notions of a designated 'beginning' and 'end' and causal progression towards a set goal. In short, everything that contributes to any standard assumptions about the text's behaviour or stability should be questioned and abolished.

4. All text is always a *discourse* where someone is trying to further ideological goals. The text is always influenced by ruling power structures and language changes, and thus there is no such thing as a neutral text.

The Connecting of Poststructuralism and Hypertext

The seemingly perfect fit between theory and medium seems to have led Landow (1992, 33), Janet Murray (1997, 133) and other theorists to a draw the conclusion that hypertext should be designed according to poststructuralist principles. And judging from the postmodern style of most hyperfictions (such as *Charmin' Cleary* and *Love One*) hyperfiction authors tend to share this view. Most hyperfictions seem doubly alienating and experimental because both the new traits of the medium and their postmodern aesthetics undermine a traditional reading experience. This is one of the reasons why the art form is in danger of becoming too hostile to readers who are not as well versed in literary theory and the medium itself as the authors. Hyperfiction enthusiasts like Landow, Joyce and Coover tend to find it irrelevant if hypertext attract readers or not, but, as illustrated by the development of film art, a regard for readers may actually be a positive balancing element in the development of the art form.

Nevertheless, some theorists have made great efforts to argue that hyperfiction has inherent poststructuralist traits. In 1992 George P. Landow authored *Hypertext: The convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* whose title illustrates the attempt to further his conviction that hypertext should be used for what it is best suited, namely to embody poststructuralist notions. Landow supports his project by using extracts from Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and others to show the similarity between their ideas and hypertext's traits. For example, a quotation of Barthes talking about the readerly versus the writerly text is used at great length in the book:

The goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of text. Our literature is characterised by the pitiless divorce between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its consumer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the pure freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum. Opposite the writerly text, then, is it countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly. We call any readerly text a classic text.

(Barthes, 1974, 4)

But, as touched on earlier, Landow and the other enthusiasts with similar views tend to take theoretical ideas expressed in a wholly different context and use them in the hypertext discussion. Landow and his fellow enthusiasts seem certain that theorists who spoke twenty to thirty years ago would agree that hypertext is a perfect medium for their ideas. But at the time they only

philosophised about how a text ideally should behave, probably not with a particular medium in mind, and Rune Aarseth believes that hypertext theory should try and do

without the unreliable testimony of the poststructuralists, whose arguments are about written discourse in general and not about certain specific technologies hardly known at their time, with the marginal exception of Jacques Derrida (1976)

(Aarseth, 1997, 165)

Aarseth believes that it is wrong to use the rather general terms used by Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and others in a completely different context to "demonstrate a common intention" (Aarseth, 1997, 84) when it comes to hypertext.

Some of these writers [poststructuralist theorists] used words such as *network* and *link* to illustrate that texts are not isolated islands of meaning but ongoing dialogues of repetition, mutation, and recombination of signs. However, to read these theorists' claims as a call for a new type of text (hypertext) is to mistake their descriptive epistemological investigation of signification (and their critique of certain previous paradigms) for a normative attack on the limits of a specific communication technology (printing).

(Aarseth, 1997, 83-84)

Nevertheless, Landow quotes as many poststructuralists as possible. Foucault is quoted as saying that "the frontiers of a book are never clear cut", that "it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network… [a] network of references." (*Archaeology*, 23). Also, Landow brings in bits from Derrida's essays to point out the similarities between hypertext traits and what Derrida saw as necessary qualities of a discourse that wished to free itself from the suppressive Western written discourse. Derrida's use of words like *link* (liaisons), *web* (toile), *network* (réseau) and *interwoven* (s'y tissent) (*Dissemination* 96, 63,98,149) are mentioned by Landow as instances of terms 'which cry out for hypertextuality' (*Hypertext*, 33). Landow also mentions the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (*Plateaus*, 1987) who point out that the 'western mind' thinks in arborescent structures: hierarchical and binary structures, and suggest that the rhizome is a better model for organising information. The way a potato plant grows in all directions without any definite beginning or end is reminiscent of hypertext's structure.

Landow's book has been one of the important factors to help make the medium seem inextricably connected with poststructuralist theory. Landow, following the structural principle of the rhizome, states that hypertext is 'closer to anarchy than to hierarchy' (*Hypertext*, 40), and he clearly believes that elements of anarchy, openness, intertextuality, multivocality, decentering and multilinearity are wholly desirable, as he never reflects whether some of the anarchy-inducing elements should be checked in order to ensure that the hyperfiction does not become all theoretical experimentation and no story.

The attempts to make hyperfiction seem naturally postmodern have generated some criticism from various commentators. Mark Bernstein comments on the criticism:

A handful of critics have launched another argument against electronic books: they cast them as a tool of postmodern ideas with which the critics disagree. Much of the better hypertext fiction, to be sure, has a certain postmodern flavour […] An interest in structure, fluidity and metafiction distinguishes the literary avant-garde of the past twenty years, and it is the avant-garde that is most often drawn to new media. But we now know that hypertext can accommodate elaborately braided plots (Victory Garden), finely wrought short-short fiction (Lust), memoir (Moments) and a vast range of poetry, as easily as it accommodates the compelling experimentation of Joyce and Jackson.

(Bernstein, 2000)

The pervasive influence that poststructuralism has among authors like Michael Joyce (*Afternoon*, 1987) and Stuart Moulthrop (*Forking Paths*, 1986), who also write hypertext theory books and essays (f. ex. M. Joyce, *Of Two Minds*, 1998) where their poststructuralist sympathies are also obvious, has resulted in a definite lack of hyperfictions with a clear, exciting story as found in "genre" fiction like detective stories, romances, or other more simple story types. The stories Bernstein mentions may have various qualities, but as he says himself "much of the better hypertext fiction, to be sure, has a certain postmodern flavour". It seems safe to say that if readers do not care for postmodernist literature, they will probably not care for contemporary hyperfiction either.

Writing only according to theoretical principles may produce hyperfictions that are not just uninteresting to most readers, but also lack true originality. This kind of writing, exemplified by William Powhilda's *Projection*, M.D. Coverley's *Life in the Chocolate Mountains* and most other hyperfictions, produce writings that are working towards similar goals. It often seems that these hyperfictions are written more for ideological and theoretical reasons, rather than being art for art's sake. This means that contemporary online hyperfictions in general get certain affinities, just look at *Twelve Blue* and *Life in the Chocolate Mountains*. These two hyperfictions have a high level of obscurity, almost no coherent storytelling, a somewhat sombre atmosphere and they both incorporate images. Generally, hyperfictions are very avant-garde, appealing mostly to the intellect, rather than the emotions. The domination of this academic avant-garde may, fortunately, be increasingly challenged by Internet hyperfictions like *Sunshine 69* and *The Unknown* that are not afraid to cater for more traditional tastes. The number of hyperfictions that are both skilfully written and speak to wide and varied audiences is likely to rise with the expansion of the Internet because more people will enjoy added possibilities for reading and writing hyperfiction and new generations of highly hypertext-literate readers will use the Internet in the future. This development is also expressed by Robert Coover in his recent *Feed* article (2000)[12]. He is the author and lecturer who published the seminal article on hypertext in *The New York Times Book Review* called *The End of Books* (1992). Expressing similar sentiments, John S. Couch says, "What's really exciting about the digital medium is that everyone's going to have a computer. Everyone is going to have access." (*Wired*, 1999).

Until now, the academic dominance on the hypertext theory scene (Landow, Coover, Bolter and most other theorisers are college professors) has helped to generate hyperfictions with interesting theoretical implications, but which also illustrate that it is now important to proceed to developing more widely appealing hyperfictions. Hyperfiction has been written since the early 1980s and it is about time that writers try to attract an audience. Someone who is very critical of the direction that hyperfiction has taken until now is Laura Miller, an editor at the online *Salon Magazine*:

The best hypertexts -- like the highlights of the Eastgate catalog, Michael Joyce's pioneering 1987 "Afternoon," Stuart Moulthrop's "Victory Garden" and Shelley Jackson's "Patchwork Girl" -- share an estimable gravity, an obsessive attention to detail and a fascination with the formal possibilities of digital narrative. They command respect. But they are unavoidably academic -- lab experiments produced by grad schools for grad schools.

<div align="right">(Miller, 1997)</div>

The hypertext author Deena Larsen is aware of the lack of immediate appeal in most hyperfictions:

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[12] www.feedmag.com/document/do291lofi.html

I have never really liked a hypertext in eight minutes. Hypertexts simply take a lot of reading time, digging out intricate passwords, finding arcane connections, learning how to read word symphonies.
[…]
I am looking forward to discussing ways we can develop effective 30-second hooks and large, complex structures-at the same time.

(Larsen, 1999)

Deena Larsen believes that hyperfictions, after almost 20 years with poststructuralist experimentation should now also try to bring in features that can attract more (kinds of) readers. It could be interesting if writers focused more on developing compelling hyperfiction poetics rather than alienating and awareness-raising ones. If wanting to attract more readers, hyperfiction authors must focus more on the traditional storytelling virtues and then integrate it with any discursive experimentation. Increasingly, well-known voices of the hypertext community are heard calling for a more reader-centred approach.

Perhaps the challenging aspect of reaching readers is to write literature they will want to read. Given the indeterminacy of hypertext narrative, fiction writers in particular face difficult problems of how to maintain suspense, how to tell a compelling (if not necessarily coherent) story, how to create in-depth characters, and how to achieve closure in a form where many narrative paths are possible and not all of the text may be read or even discovered by casual readers.

(Hayles, 1999)

Most of the comprehensive hyperfictions produced until now have not faced the problems Hayles talk about. This may be a mistake, because the traits of most contemporary online hyperfictions indicate that without more consideration of the reader's interests and competences, they tend to become rather static and obscure, like *Ferris Wheels*, *Love One* and many others. Thus, the poststructuralist flavour of hypertext's traits has until now been a curse as much as a blessing because it has inspired theorists like Landow (1997) and Bolter (1995) insist that hyperfictions should utilise these traits if they wanted to do justice to the new medium. Hypertext theorists seem to believe that any use of traditional elements in hyperfiction is just nostalgic longing for the usual reading patterns and an act of sabotage against hyperfiction's revolution against standard literary values. Any attempt at popularising the art form thus seem suspect, which threaten to complicate a development of the medium which can bring it more in touch with readers' wants.

Robert Coover calls the late eighties and the early nineties "the Golden Age" of hypertext writing, primarily because it was not "polluted" by bad hyperfiction on the Internet and by what he sees as a contemporary urge to include as many multimedia gimmicks as possible. He also believes that the passionate experimentation of the Golden Age is a thing of the past. He describes the situation in the following way:

Silver ages are said to follow upon golden ages – as marriage and family follow upon romance – and last longer but not forever. They are characterised by a retreat from radical visions and a return to major elements of the preceding tradition (while retaining a fascination with surface elements of the golden age innovations) by a great diffusion and popularisation of its diluted principles and their embodiment in institutions, and by a prolific widespread output in the name of what went before, though no longer that thing exactly.

(Coover, 2000)

Coover believes that hyperfiction's move from CD-Rom or diskette to the Internet is destroying the pure form of hypertext, which is exemplified in hyperfictions like *Afternoon: A Story* (M. Joyce), *Victory Garden* (Moulthrop), and *Patchwork Girl* (Shelley Jackson). Of course there are more visuals and sound in online hyperfiction and some of them have a tendency to be a bit more

accessible than the first, diskette based hyperfictions.But that is a necessary development if it is ever going to make the crossover from avant-garde experimentation to popular literature.

Later in the online article Coover shows the low regard he has for readers in general when he asserts about *Patchwork Girl* and the other "literary hypertexts" of the golden age that

> not that many did read these works as carefully or as thoroughly as they deserved, but that is true of the reading of books as well. We have always insisted that printbound texts need good engaged readers to fulfil their concealed potential. Now, in hypertext that readerly role was made manifest and foregrounded.
>
> (Coover, 2000)

In Coovers view, it was the readers that let down hypertext – not the other way around. It is true that the hyperfiction reader must be alert to many layers of meaning and it thus becomes very important that he is sufficiently "engaged" in his hyperfiction reading. Coover thinks that hypertext demands extremely close attention, perhaps more than printed literature, if it is to function optimally. *The Unknown* proves that this is not necessarily correct because it only functions optimally if the reader practices "surf reading", which is fast and reckless reading.

The answer to why the hypertexts of the 'Golden age' and those similar to them on the Internet apparently do not get the right kind or level of reader attention may be answered by reader response theorising. The ideas of the renowned scholar Umberto Eco, especially those involving the 'model reader' ('implied reader' in Wolfgang Iser's terminology), can be used to illustrate how hypertext authors and theorists almost exclusively write for specialist readers with a kind and level of interpretation competences that average readers do not possess.

Reader Response

Eco states, in *Il lettore Modello* (*The Model Reader*) that a text leaves gaps for two reasons. Firstly, it is 'lazy' – it lives and flourishes on the additional meaning that the reader brings to it. Secondly, it wants to leave the initiative of interpretation to the reader, while limiting possible interpretations to a certain range. It is therefore crucial that the reader is capable of fleshing out most gaps and understanding what the author expects him to. The author should have a certain reader type in mind for his text, even if he does not believe that such a reader exists. Eco uses *Finnegan's Wake* as an example of a text that envisions a model reader that probably does not exist. Its ideal reader would be someone with much spare time, immense associative powers, and a vast encyclopaedic knowledge. Thus, the model reader is he who can realise most of the references criss-crossing the book. Eco says:

> In other words, the Model Reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions (Austin, 1962) to be met in order to have a macro-speech act (such as a text is) fully realized.
>
> (1979, p. 11)

This kind of 'unreadable' text that Eco talks about reminds one of the substantial amount of hyperfictions that are extremely ambiguous, like *Kokura*[13]or *LoveOne*[14]. These hyperfictions presume readers who enjoy a very high level of ambiguity and who do not mind extreme

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[13] http://www.eastgate.com/Kokura/Welcome.html
[14] www.eastgate.com/malloy/welcome.html

incoherence. Furthermore, these hyperfictions do not 'work to produce' their model readers, because they do not let readers gain any "foothold" in the narration because they supply too little contextual information. Readers know so little about the circumstances of the story and do not know enough to gain any empathy for the characters, and many short and obscure lexias seem meaningless because they cannot be put in relation to anything. Thus, the hyperfiction becomes unreadable in the sense that readers loose interest and give up when they cannot find a meaningful perspective to put it all in relation to.

The model reader is someone who can realise the text exactly as planned, taking the same mental steps when interpreting it as those made by the author when composing it. When deciding on which kind of model reader he envisions, the author must choose which competences to demand and these can be divided under three main headings:

- Language (English, Italian, etc)
- Encyclopaedic knowledge (technological, literary theory, etc.)
- Encyclopaedic and stylistic type (genre, geographic, etc)

But it is not enough to just try to address some basic competences and then figure that the text will hit a certain group of readers. The reader is not necessarily a model reader from the outset, but can be shown how to deduct the intended meanings from the text. This is a very important point to note for hyperfiction, as it has many new interpretation competences to teach its readers. An author should try to shape any reader into a perfect model reader of his text by challenging him to reach new insights. The text should strengthen or bring forth certain competences if they are not present at the outset. As noted earlier, many hyperfictions' problem is that they do not take enough care to bring the new competences required for reading in an interactive medium forth very gradually.

One of the reasons why hyperfiction writers so often seem to either misjudge or wholly disregard common reader preferences is that they think they are part of the same 'interpretive community' (Fish, 1982). They seem to presume that the reader has the same interest and competences in hypertext theory and that he takes a keen interest in postmodern discourse, metafictional passages, deliberate disorientation and experimentation with the medium and literary conventions. The tendency to write for an elitist audience may be the reason why it has not reached much popularity, but it is necessary to take a closer look at what kind of model reader some specific hyperfictions have, in order to establish the reasons more precisely. Eco's theories and his dictum that the model reader is an instance of favourable conditions, which must be present if a text is to be realised in its full potential, are important to this investigation which will reveal that rather few readers are likely to have the necessary competences for appreciating most contemporary online hyperfictions to their fullest.

The Straight Path and *The Buddha Smiled*: Examples of First Generation Hyperfiction

The two hyperfiction examples are fitting representatives of what theorists have been preaching for 15 years. They definitely have the "postmodern flavour" (Bernstein, 2000) and the slightly pompous earnestness that most first generation hyperfictions have. The two are joint prizewinners

in the 1999 New York University Press Prize contest for hyperfiction[15] judged by Stuart Moulthrop and artist Adrianne Wortzel. One is called *The Buddha Smiled*[16] and is written by the New York based Pratik Kanjilal. It is "a fictionalised hypertext reaction to the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998"[17]. The other is called *The Straight Path: fi Sabile Allah*[18] and is by the Pakistani Adnan Ashraf. It "is a travelogue, and meditation on Haj, a Muslim's pilgrimage to Makkah"[19].

What characterises the two texts is that they are focused on a global theme rather than on telling a story that can stand alone. Furthermore, they are rather serious, containing little humour, plot, suspense or other elements to spice up their ruminations. The two hypertexts contain very fine writing, but they have, like most other hyperfictions, a tendency to intellectualise and alienate.

The Buddha Smiled and then *The Straight Path* will first be briefly described and then the model reader of the two hypertexts will be described according to the principles of Umberto Eco.

The Buddha Smiled

The Buddha Smiled is a very short hyperfiction with only 18 lexias and about 25-35 links. It exhibits some of the stock poststructuralist traits, notably metafictional passages and aimlessness, but it is generally not as ambiguous as many other online hyperfictions. Its metafictional theme is the actual impossibility of story endings and how individual voices are only heard if they fit into society's grand machinery.

How did this story end? Aku, the unnamed man in Delhi, the girl who had just flitted in on a transatlantic flight and flitted out of the narrative right away -- did they ever meet? Unfortunately, these are pretty irrelevant questions, as irrelevant as asking whether a hypertext sequence should be read front to back.
It is the nature of such stories, like hypertext itself, to be never-ending. The three characters never meet, probably never shall. Even if they do, nothing will come of it. Because it is an imperative for the great machine of civilisation to still the individual voice, to discredit everything that fails to fall in line with its bar-coded version of reality.

(/lastword/, 1999)

As most other hyperfictions, *The Buddha Smiled* does not have a stable centre of narration, like a particular character or place that the story orbits around. We meet many different people, without any of them becoming central – they are all just passing through the story. As said, there is, however, a main theme, namely a comment on the nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan. This topical coherence ties the events together somewhat and gives them a level of purpose rare in hyperfiction. Unfortunately, this complete focus on a grand theme also makes it rather one-dimensional.

There is one aspect in particular where Pratik Kanjilal breaks with the poststructuralist aesthetics: it has very well defined borders of beginning ('/spiral/', 1999) and ending ('/lastword/', 1999). But, as

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[15] www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/
[16] www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/buddha/
[17] www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/
[18] www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/straightpath/
[19] www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/

shown in the citation above, the author conveys his awareness of the impossibility of definite endings and this way he keeps the story open to some degree. In general, its structure is rather simple and it is not very innovative in its use of linking. It has very few links and a fairly logically connected, associative linking (as opposed to random). Some reasons why it does not seem more immediately appealing may be the lack of a plot, the serious and dry tone and its heavy focus on real-world problems. There are no colours or maps to give the reader a better overview and easy navigation around the hyperfiction. The reader is therefore met by a very simple looking text: large black words on a white background. The reader's initial impression of the hyperfiction is therefore likely to be that it will be heavy work to read it, so its form does not contribute to creating a 'hook', like it does in *The Unknown* or *Sunshine 69*. The crucial need to capture short-term, as well as long-term attention is emphasised by the hyperfiction author Deena Larsen.

[…] if the goal is to sell hypertexts then readers should be able to understand what the thing is about and have a good time in about 30 seconds. […] I am looking forward to discussing ways we can develop effective 30 second hooks and large, complex structures-at the same time.

(Larsen, 1999)

Perhaps hyperfictions that manage to combine "30 second hooks" with "large, complex structures" should be rewarded more in hypertext competitions in the future, in order to signal that it is also important to make it easier for more readers to connect with the art form.

The Straight Path

The Straight Path: fi Sabile Allah by Adnan Ashraf is a much larger hyperfiction with more than a hundred lexias and a little more links. It is more typical of most online hyperfiction in that it is much more extensive and much more obscure temporally, spatially, causally and in its use of characters. The text has a default path for the less adventurous readers, but that does not make the reading more meaningful, and following it really removes any reason why the text should be electronic. It has much philosophising and reflection that seems to go on and on rather aimlessly. This relative aimlessness is one of the poststructuralist virtues as it is supposed to make the reader focus on the journey rather than on the arriving. But it probably makes many readers give up on it, as they may not always find the incoherent text compelling enough to constitute a fascinating journey. The drive and immediate appeal of the story has second priority, while an exposition of religious musings by the narrator seems to be the main purpose.

It has a designated beginning, and if one follows the default path it leads to a concluding lexia. But the beginning is in medias res and the ending is without any kind of resolution (not that there is much to resolve). Furthermore, the links do not seem to have much associative or causal connection. Thus, the arbitrarily criss-crossing links, the almost non-existent narrative progression and the great length of this hyperfiction and some of its lexias mean that it is almost unreadable to someone who does not have a serious interest in issues like spiritual development and religion. But most importantly, it, just as *The Buddha Smiled*, lacks a plot, warmth, basic suspense, and sufficient milieu- and character-development. The reading thus becomes non-committed and is not likely to bring the reader many emotional rewards, mostly intellectual ones.

As an example of the absolute lack of a "hook" in *The Straight Path* I cite the opening lexia (after the foreword):

His face was a fluid armature and projection field, a nexus making visible Dna's memory of all that is great in art, life, physical at first, the unravelings, history's greatest jawbones, its most illumined eyes, the hearts of the maddest madmen and women traversing the God-beaten and gladdened black bridges of the Seine, the Indus, the Neva, spreading warmth in all directions, feeding the light penetrating Abdel-Khalik's browstone, radiating from inside, beyond, perfecting a man pious enough to find himself in the right spot, praying so sweetly, one cannot describe, praying ecstatically as one can without tripping on himself, through the distortions of a military bullhorn, the Arafat khutbah flowed, the geyser of its rapid-fire commandment escaping his throat as helicopters tore up the desert air.

(/Abdel_Khalik_410/, 1999)

The lexia uses a challenging language with its stream-of-conscience style writing that requires strong reader concentration from the outset in order to make sense of it. As noted, the hyperfiction does not establish itself with a widely appealing, gradual incorporation of the reader, but instead opens with a rather demanding wall of words. This hyperfiction thus neither seems to have the 30-second hook or the long-lasting appeal.

The Great Gap Between Authors' 'Model Reader' and Most Readers

Now it is time to examine the finer points of why there seems to exist such a considerable difference between the model reader that hyperfiction authors tend to envision and the actual average reader. Umberto Eco has, in his "Role of the Reader" (Eco, 1979), described the features that shape the authors' presuppositions and the kinds of competences that readers need to have in order to 'connect' with the text. Applying some of Eco's principles to the two hyperfictions will make it clear that the two hyperfictions' demands on the reader's interpretive competences are so specialised that only readers who are experienced with ruling hypertext aesthetics will be able to appreciate them as intended.

Under the heading of 'codes and subcodes' Eco lists 7 different types of knowledge that the reader uses to invest the text with his own unique meaning. These 7 points are:

1. Basic dictionary (encyclopaedic knowledge).
2. Rules of co-reference (when for instance "she" refers to a person described earlier).
3. Contextual and circumstantial selections (When "aye" means different things on a ship and at a vote (Eco, 1979)).
4. Rhetorical and stylistic overcoding (When words imply more meaning than their literate meaning, like in "Once upon a time" (Eco, 1979)).
5. Inferences by common frames (typical situations we all know, like a child's birthday party or shopping in a supermarket (Eco, 1979))
6. Inferences by intertextual frames (similar events in other texts are remembered and the present text gains meaning in relation to that).
7. Ideological overcoding (the ideological views of the reader determine how he interprets the text. If he agrees, he may not try to find other meanings, otherwise he may try to find meanings that he likes).

Only a few of these seven points hold competences that seem to be particularly needed or challenged in a new way when interpreting hyperfiction. Hyperfictions appear to demand strong competences in 'contextual and circumstantial selections', 'rhetorical and stylistic overcoding', and 'ideological overcodings'. Hyperfiction readers particularly need these competences and they will therefore be discussed in the following.

To be able to make the right *contextual and circumstantial selections* is the competence that allows the reader to apply different meanings to words that can have several meanings dependent on the situation they are uttered in. The ability to interpret text in the light of the situation is necessary for picking up all the subtle nuances of meaning. This competence is naturally very important in hyperfiction, which has many changing contexts, often with very abrupt transitions. There is always a shadow of the preceding link's meaning on the lexia it leads to. Thus, the model reader must be able to pick up subtle contextual changes between lexias in order to comprehend the full range of meaning.

Making contextual and circumstantial selections in such a changeable and intricately structured medium is very demanding, and those who are not very familiar with it may find the prominent polyvocality and frequent and unexplained temporal/spatial shifts too confusing. Underneath is an example of how *The Straight Path* habitually refrains from providing basic information about time, place, who is speaking and to whom. The lexia is reached by clicking the word "bridges" in the first lexia[20]. The reader thus has no information about who 'DNA' or 'K' is and he does not know for certain the time or place (Greece?) for this exchange:

DNA: Are you going to be in Greece in August?

K: Maybe, I'm thinking about going to Turkey for the festival of the butterflies.

DNA: I'd like to see you again, maybe later this summer. I'd like to come to Athens again, but I want to go to this wedding in Morocco. But it would be nice to see you again in that part of the world.

K: Let's burn our bridges when we get to them.

(/burn_our_bridges_791/, 1999)

This ambiguousness may seem enticing when displayed in this limited scope, but when practised through about 70 lexias the reader may get somewhat frustrated. When he ceaselessly has to scout for scraps of information in order to find out where the present lexia is set, who is in it and when it is taking place he is likely to end up skipping or skimming lexias that appear too blurry. He will probably have trouble "catching up" with the text, as he never seems to get ample knowledge about the frame for the discourse. The multitude of different contexts result in no context at all, because the reader is likely to give up caring about what context the lexia is in and the reading thus becomes almost context-less. Thus, the changing and blurry contexts may not necessarily mean increased

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[20] /Abdel_Khalik_410.html/

heterogeneity and polyvocality, but may instead make the hyperfiction a cacophony of voices that blend into one with no identity at all and then it all becomes very impersonal.

Rhetorical and stylistic overcoding. Rhetorical overcoding is when the writer uses tropes and styles that signal that it should not be interpreted in a naïve and denotative way. The reader should be able to recognise certain ways of expression that have several levels of meaning. When, like in Eco's example, the text says that Raoul and Marguerite are married, the reader presumes that they are married to each other, because he knows that it is a common figure of speech. Similarly, there are certain words that now have gained a connotative meaning in relation to hyperfiction. For instance, many hyperfictions speak of things that symbolise hypertext, like mazes, gardens, rhizomes, and things made up by many disparate parts, like Frankenstein's monster or a quilt. Furthermore, everything that has poststructuralist implications in a hyperfiction constitutes what Eco calls *genre overcoding*, which is when particular metaphors gain an extra level of meaning within a genre. For example, the following extract from *The Buddha Smiled* is an example of how Pratik Kanjilal by his associative tying together of apparently unrelated events in the same lexia, implicitly refers to hypertext's appropriateness for associative writing, or stream-of-consciousness writing.

On May Day, in the year that the Manifesto of the Communist Party turned 150, a man stopped his pickup […] Then he shouted something unintelligible, waved a flag […]
[…] the Rand think-tank […] released a report, also datelined May Day, predicting that Pakistan was doomed to a political future defined by low-level conflict with India over Kashmir. […]
The same morning in Bombay, the primary target of Pakistan's nuclear missile program, a Hindu group ransacked the home of the artist MF Husain, in retaliation to his painting a goddess in the nude. Like the man in LA, they also waved flags, […]

(/spiral/, 1999)

Hyperfiction thus often avails itself of a kind of genre overcoding that is based on poststructuralist theories and hypertext theory which readers have to be familiar with in order to fully comprehend it. The competence that is needed to decode these references is very similar to that of subcode no. 6, *inferences by intertextual frames*. This is when readers recognise certain phrases or situations from other texts and in the case of hyperfiction, as mentioned, there are often references to common metaphors within hypertext theory (for example, how it is endless, like a garden, rhizome, or maze). As Eco states

Every character (or situation) of a novel is immediately endowed with properties that the text does not directly manifest and that the reader has been "programmed" to borrow from the treasury of intertextuality.

(1979, p. 21)

Few readers have read hypertext theory and know for example about Deleuze and Guattari's notions about the structure of the rhizome and its relation to discourse, or other ideas and concepts that have become inextricably connected to hypertext's traits. Consequently, hypertext writers and theorists are in danger of becoming too advanced for the general public, because they see hyperfiction and theory as being so interlocked and so include many references to theory in the hyperfictions. The theoretical notions that are by now commonplaces to them are most likely to be unknown to lay readers. For example, if there is a situation in a hyperfiction where someone describes a potato (a rhizome), then many readers will not be able to understand its connotative reference to hypertext's traits.

Stylistic overcoding is another mode of signifying that has acquired a new significance in hyperfiction. The reader of hyperfiction must develop a competence to recognise certain standard stylistic techniques in the use of links. The link methodologies (the cycle, counterpoint, tangle) described in the first chapter are instances of standard uses of links that have begun to settle and become stylistic overcoding. *The Buddha Smiled* uses 'the cycle' at one point where the reader is sent back to the already visited /yield/ lexia. The reader who has a well developed competence in interpreting stylistic overcoding will be able to realise from this that 1) the /yield/ lexia is central 2) the cyclical form could refer to the theme of how there is a 'spiral of silence' (dissenting voices are silenced) 3) or the cyclical form could refer to the fact that history tends to repeat itself.

 Ideological overcoding. Any text has ideological constructs that may influence the reader. If the reader agrees with the values advocated by the text, he is not likely to question it as much. He may just let himself drift along with the discursive flow. In contrast, if he disagrees with them he may focus much more on how the elements of the text work to further the ideological beliefs of the author. Or the reader may just notice the passages that seem to support his own values. This way he may interpret the text in a completely different way than intended by the author.

With their dedicated focus on Islam and nuclear testing, the two hyperfictions in question do not praise the qualities of the medium or poststructuralism so much as some first generation hyperfictions. But *The Buddha Smiled* does it to a certain degree in its comparison of hypertext traits and the true nature of stories. Hyperfiction in general is still permeated with enthusiasm for the technological possibilities for creating a radically new reading experience and for applying the poststructuralist theories in practice. Someone like Sven Birkerts, the outspoken anti-hyperfiction theorist, would probably notice the ideological overcodings and would probably become irritated, to the point of being distracted from the story, by the techno-evangelism implicit in most hyperfictions, including *The Buddha Smiled.*

It is now clear that readers need increased competences within certain subcodes in order to read hyperfictions like *The Straight Path* and *The Buddha Smiled.* It is probably not a problem them to adapt to these demands, as they learn to recognise the distinctive features of the art form. The problem is that they must first read a couple of hyperfictions in order to realise the more subtle meanings and when most hyperfictions are like these two with no plot, humour, suspense, familiarity or intimacy, then they will not be likely to read much of it.

The authors, who demand these competences from the reader, have various presuppositions when composing their hyperfiction and they will now be described, to see why there is such a gap between readers' competences and what authors expect. Eco's table describing the relationship between author and reader is shown underneath. The processes shown in the figure are then applied to the two hyperfictions.

Figure 0.2
Reprinted from *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.142.
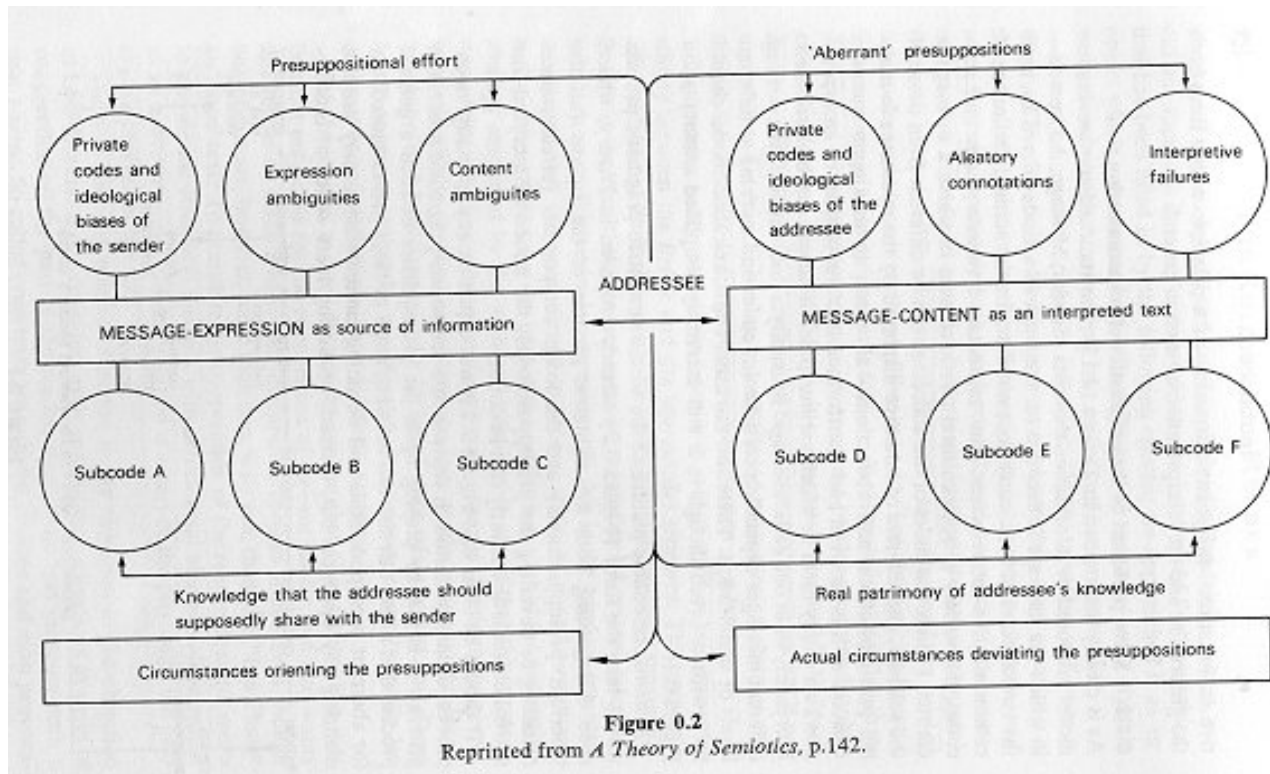
Presuppositional Effort in *The Buddha Smiled* and *The Straight Path*

Private codes and ideological biases of the author

Pratik Kanjilal wants us to realise the idiocy in testing and threatening with nuclear weapons and Adnan Ashraf wants us to understand and possibly share the world of being a Muslim. As mentioned, Pratik Kanjilal expresses his sympathy for poststructuralist ideas and the supposed honesty of the medium in *The Buddha Smiled*, in the last lexia, when he writes, "It is the nature of such stories, like hypertext itself, to be never-ending" (/lastword/, 1999). Like most other hypertext enthusiasts he seems to believe that hypertext can embody the true nature of stories.

Expression ambiguities

In hyperfiction there is often an increased element of ambiguity due to the less defined connections between text units. The links of *The Straight Path* in particular have very little logical connection to the lexias they lead to and thus much of its ambiguity is created by its mode of expression.

Content ambiguities

The two hyperfictions really have no plot, but rather address an overall issue. Consequently, that issue tends to overshadow any other meanings. But *The Straight Path* sometimes leave so many questions hanging in the air that it can barely be called a narrative. A couple of obscure lexias are cited in the following, to illustrate the difficulty of ever "connecting" with this hyperfiction:

[…]
you are on the [expletive] [expletive]
you are in the [expletive] [expletive] [expletive]
on the fresh trimmed green
and you are [expletive] there [expletive] [expletive] [expletive] [expletive] K.
[expletive] [expletive] [expletive] [expletive] [expletive]
you [expletive] [expletive] [expletive] [expletive] [expletive] [expletive] finish
[…]

(/safa_and_marwa_616/, 1999)

(clicking 'K' leads to)

Date: Tue, 05 May 98 16:06:32 -0500
From: "DNA"<dna@dunya.com>
To: <dna@fana.org>:
Subject: all the time in the world
Mime-Version: 1.0
Status: U

you're young. you have a lot of time.

i have all the time in the world.

+++

she was like a node in a hypertext, ageless, forever <u>waiting</u> for a vector to blow her away.

(*The Straight Path*, /k/, 1999)

These two lexias give an impression of the avant-garde style of the hyperfiction and the great amount of work that the reader has to do in order to collect enough information from each lexia to be able to construct a meaningful whole.

The Buddha Smiled is much more coherent. Many of its links have a very clear, causal connection to what they lead to:

[…] Then the <u>screen</u> blinked, and the PM was speaking again in the dry, measured tone of a satisfied small-time accountant.

(/yield/, 1999)

clicking "screen" leads to:

Aku hit the remote. The screen of his old set shrank into a cold, white point, centred on the afterimage of the Prime Minister's open mouth […]

(/tvshut/, 1999)

The two hyperfictions' high level of ambiguity is mostly due to the fact that neither of them has any basic establishing of setting nor characters, and combined with the lack of plot, this almost makes them unreadable for everyone but those who are only interested in them as a travelogue and personal diary.

Knowledge that the Addressee Should Supposedly Share with the Sender (reader's subcodes)

Basically, all the reader should know are the ruling, deconstructive poetics of hyperfiction and the fact that these hyperfictions are more concerned with describing issues and theoretical implications surrounding the text. Therefore he should not expect any plot drive or large fictional constructs.

Circumstances Orienting the Presuppositions

It seems likely that the authors of the two hyperfictions overestimated the adjustability of the readers, perhaps because they believed that readers were as used to the interactive electronic medium as they were. Furthermore, as David Miall has noted (1999b), there is a tendency within hypertext theory, to equate reading patterns when reading non-fiction with those of reading literature. It may be that the two authors thought that having experience with interpretation of non-fiction Internet material would prepare readers for the hyperfiction poetics. But Internet reading is obviously different because everything is done to make them feel at home, to make their reading as smooth as possible.

'Aberrant' Presuppositions

Private codes and ideological biases of the reader

Generally, readers in general tend to be more conservative and less idealistic about hyperfiction's potential than most of the writers, perhaps because the readers are often not as involved in the computer environment or as interested in its theoretical implications. They mistrust this new art form, because it seems wrong to put something as simple and familiar as literature in a medium as complex and alienating as the computer. And thus, when hyperfiction only speaks to a few of readers' usual interpretive competences and seem to be more interested in imposing new aesthetic values than honouring some of those they already have, they are often likely to lose interest.

Aleatory connotations and interpretive failures

As indicated before, contemporary readers are often at a great risk of misinterpreting a hyperfiction because they are inexperienced in this kind of reading and because there are fewer and less concrete conventions of how to imply meanings between the lines. Most readers, at this point in time, are not aware of the added significance that structure has in hypertext, like the relation a certain link-word have to the lexia it leads to. Readers may forget what word led them to the lexia they are reading and thus miss a subtle twist on its meaning. Like for example in *The Buddha Smiled*, which at one point makes a subtle comment on America:

A standardised <u>middle-class dream</u>, quartered in a standardised middle-class room.

(/waking/, 1999)

When 'middleclass dream' is clicked it leads to a lexia about USA in the 50s, implying how this kind of society represents the bourgeois ideal.

Step off the road. Step into America. […]

(/america/, 1999)

But, generally speaking, there really is little to misinterpret in these two hyperfictions, because there is not much to interpret in the first place. The authors are out to advocate certain outlooks on nuclear weapons and religion, rather than creating an intricate plot and several layers of meaning.

The Actual Subcodes of the Reader

These are the habits and preferences that average readers actually have in contrast to what authors presume they have. The subcodes of course vary considerably, as discussed in relation to reader types in chapter one, so it very difficult to generalise about them. It suffices to say that the readers that hyperfiction could do more to attract, namely the large 'middle' group of people who are not highly experienced with computers or hyperfiction and not computer game playing teenagers, probably mainly have book reading habits. That is probably the most important point to note in this connection and hopefully more hyperfiction authors like Kanjilal and Ashraf will put a higher priority on plot development and other traditional virtues in order to initiate more of these readers to hyperfiction.

Actual Circumstances Deviating the Presuppositions

The kind of hypertext that many of us encounter is on the Internet. This predominantly non-fiction hypertext is often organised into short units of information, it holds easily understood language and it often seeks to provide instant gratification in order to attract as many readers as possible. Readers who have only experienced "interactive" reading on the Internet are therefore used to a fast pace, bombastic language use, goal-oriented writing, and logically connected links. Thus, having to read something on a screen that holds back on any rewards and which seems long-winded and without any obvious purpose is much to ask from any reader accustomed to the flux of the World Wide Web. In short, the non-fiction Internet texts are still permeated by Western enlightenment values of linearity, purpose and causality, so hyperfiction authors should not presume that Internet experienced readers are necessarily seasoned interpreters of hyperfiction.

Furthermore, the less defined reading environment of hyperfiction complicates the interpretation act even further. In online hyperfictions, the reader often knows much less about the facts surrounding the creation of the text than if he was reading a book. When reading a book, readers are often aware of background information about the author, setting, the genre etc. from the book's cover, reviews or other sources. Furthermore, he seldom knows anything about the hypertext's size, genre or general qualities. After centuries of fiction writing, there are of course much more discussion about

and references to books in the other media than about hyperfiction. But, introductions to hyperfictions are becoming better and more comprehensive. Hyperfictions are described in online-magazines, other hypertext-related sites, or in the "front page" lexia of the hyperfiction. Underneath is a part of the descriptions (there were also links to short essays on them) of *The Buddha Smiled* and *The Straight Path*.

The Straight Path, fi Sabile Allah, is a travelogue, and meditation on Haj, a muslim's pilgrimage to Makkah.

The Buddha Smiled is a fictionalized hypertext reaction to the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998.

"The Straight Path is a compelling and brilliantly constructed narrative of spiritual awakening."

"The Buddha Smiled is genuinely hypertextual, not a monologic sermon but a space of ideas with admitted gaps and indeterminacies. It is impressive how much Kanjilal accomplishes by implication and by holding his text open to its possibilities."

(Moulthrop, 1999[21])

With this description hyperfiction readers are helped to gain some knowledge of what they are entering, but they are unaware of its length and with the rapid and abrupt changes that the linking facilitates, it is harder to predict how much it may change. The increased unawareness of the circumstances of utterance produces a less predetermined reading, where the reader must keep an open mind. This reading situation demands independent and open-minded readers who can manage without the crutch of knowing beforehand, the circumstances of composition and the boundaries of the text.

Hyperfiction Needs to Reach out to Readers

It is clear that the gap between the two hyperfiction authors' model reader and the actual competences and preferences of most people is rather wide. A combination of the academic environment it has been developed in and the experimentation with it based on its supposedly poststructuralist traits has produced hyperfictions that presuppose highbrow readers, though most people cannot relate to this kind of hyperfiction.

Presently, it seems that valuable hyperfiction is one thing to the inner-circle of readers and writers of hyperfiction and another to many other people, especially outside academia. What we need is hyperfictions that fundamentally address competences that most readers have and then gradually teach readers the required interpretation skills. Hyperfiction simply needs to become more appealing to new readers by also offering captivating entertainment and address more traditional interpretation competences. Films started out by using storytelling techniques from older media and then through time added its own ways of signifying that defined it as an autonomous medium. This way the new conventions of the medium developed gradually, incorporated in a simple, strong story that hooked the audience and made them accept certain experiments with the form. Gene Ashe has made the observation about hyperfiction that it is trying to force through a change that is too big for

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[21] www.nyupress.nyu.edu/hypertext/

the general audience. Using business principles, he concludes that in order to reach those who are not on the cutting edge of new literature, it is important to only introduce 'micro-changes'.

The real point here is that a micro-change helps to promote mass acceptance within a market. Once the ball is rolling in the direction of mass acceptance, then something like critical mass, the 100th monkey syndrome, or in the case of fusion, unity, takes over and begins driving the demand. Conceiving the size and "hook" for this micro-change will require creative input in the product development process. New ideas and products must make micro transitional or quantum changes in their development to foster wider acceptance.

(Gene Ashe, 1999)

The two hyperfictions under discussion in this chapter have, like most other 'serious' hyperfictions, tried to impose a form of electronic literature on the reader that could be called an 'essaystory'. It resembles postmodern print literature, but combined with the properties of the new medium, its alienating nature and lack of plot probably feel particularly hostile. Therefore, hyperfiction authors who aim for a wider reader appeal than what *The Buddha Smiled* and *The Straight Path* have, must come to terms with the fact that the, by poststructuralism, dreaded authority of a strong storyline and captivating fictional world is necessary for gaining any popularity.

Chapter 4

We're the Unknown, a group of hypertext novelists who have written a hypertext novel, The Unknown, as a publicity stunt for an anthology of our own best writing we're publishing called The Unknown. The hypertext novel is the story of our book tour that we haven't gone on yet.

Scott Rettberg, *The Unknown*,
/unknown/, (1998)

The Unknown: Innovating Popular Literature

Having illustrated in chapter three how the specialised demands to readers make some hyperfictions almost unreadable for many readers, it is now interesting to look at a hyperfiction that seems to assume a less theory-oriented, more practical model reader. Like other hyperfictions, *The Unknown* also sometimes requires interpretation competences that many readers do not have. But The Unknown keep the reader's feelings of alienation and confusion on a less disturbing level, because they establish a very strong overall contextual frame of setting in time and space that stabilises and preserves a fundamental coherence. In addition, it contains breathing spaces in the form of passages of simple humour and action in between theory-laden ruminations. This makes the reading experience somewhat lighter than that produced by the many serious, ideological, taciturn and lyrical hyperfictions found on the Internet. It thus appears to offer a more friendly and straightforward reading environment to readers who are still fairly unfamiliar with hyperfiction. But it still manages to experiment with new modes of signifying and it may therefore represent the golden mean between poststructuralist playing with form and the traditional focus on content. Hopefully, *The Unknown* will encourage other writers to focus a little less on poststructuralist

ideals, broaden their scope, and turn their academic expectations to readers slightly down, so that an increasingly varied field of hypertext literature genres can develop.

In the course of the chapter, *The Unknown*'s innovations, general aesthetics and breaks with poststructuralist commonplaces within hyperfiction are described and used to conclude that it is indeed possible to both fascinate and innovate in hyperfiction. But first a general description of the hyperfiction and the kind of reader it seems to presuppose is needed.

The Story

Four authors have gone on a book tour to promote their book *The Anthology of the Unknown.* The tour mainly takes place in the USA, but also brings them to Canada, the Far East and Europe. The narrative parodies the style and content of the 1950's Beat movement and authors like Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson and William S. Burroughs.

Each lexia often takes place in a city, where they have made a stop to do a live reading from their anthology. In these live reading lexias, there is often an audio button, which the reader can click if he wishes to hear the reading as well. On the tour they use drugs, drink, fight and generally have a good and wild time. The four are rich and famous and living like rock stars ant their tour is extremely chaotic and filled with improbable events. One of the major story threads is about Dirk, one of the character/authors, becoming a psychic cult leader. He is murdered during the New Year's Eve 1999 celebrations, but aliens have enabled him to resurrect in a spiritual form. The story appears to end when Dirk shows himself to Scott on a screen and tells of what is going to happen to the characters and the hyperfiction in the future. All the major loose ends are then wrapped up in lexias called *Everything turned out alright* (/denouement/, 1998) and *The End* (/theend/, 2000).

In addition to the fiction there are eleven other sections of the site. Divided into these sections there is a map of many of the cities they visited, some real emails concerning the authors or *The Unknown*, a documentary about some things they did, metafictional reflections, a list of people involved in the fiction, an email address, and other less relevant elements. The important thing is that there are sometimes links between the fiction to the other sections: the metafictional, the documentary, and the correspondence. The lexias within these sections are designed with their own, distinctive colours, which make them both intertwined, but also slightly distinct from the narrative.

Main Theme

Being a fast paced and juvenile boys' yarn, the story is obviously not one of many layers and not very rich on themes and symbols. Its aim is first and foremost to tell an entertaining story, and so, in contrast to *The Buddha Smiled* and *The Straight Path*, it seems to have no principal message or thematic aim besides promoting itself. It seems to be mainly about itself and its authors, while commenting playfully on other subjects along the way. It is thus obvious that its purpose was originally to advertise the publishing of their (print) book, which has not happened yet. Here is a description in *The Unknown*, supposedly by a feminist critic, of the matters dealt with in the story:

It's about messianic proclamations, assassinations, sex, drugs, literary theory, sex, life's boundless angst, drugs, name-dropping, intertextuality, meta-writing, sex, art, art imitating life, life imitating art, drugs, and sex.

(/femcritique/, 1998).

Some of its principal concerns will be elaborated briefly in the following. These are: the implications of writing in an online and interactive medium, politics, and intertextuality.

1. Writing in an online and interactive medium

As noted, the metafictional theme is a very common one in hypertext art. It is almost so common that metafictional meditations have come to seem inextricably tied to hyperfiction. A combination of the medium's novelty (newborn media tend to be obsessed with themselves in the first stages), its alienating properties, and, most importantly, poststructuralist ideas has from the outset ensured that metafiction became one of the medium's stock themes. This obsession with itself and its relation to the surrounding world and other texts has become tiring by now, considering it has already been practised extensively in modernist and postmodernist literature already. The writers of *The Unknown* apparently also find this standard subject of most hyperfictions and –poems tiring:

W: I hate how Dirk is always complaining about how every hypertext he reads is so concerned with itself, always theorizing about its genre, etc.--and then, when he gets a chance to write hypertext all he does is dive full-bodied and nude into that very arena! Goddammit, Dirk, quit using my persona to further your despicable navel-gazing obsessions! Let the hypertext blossom for once!

(/willteach/, 1998)

There is therefore a considerable conflict in *The Unknown*, between wanting to keep it from becoming all about itself, but still being tempted to make remarks about certain novel and interesting implications of the text that they notice during composing it. The hypertext thus becomes a curious mixture of metafictional reflections and criticism of this "navel-gazing", which are really also a form of metafictional reflections themselves. So it actually becomes just as metafictional as the hyperfictions it criticises, but it has moved to the next stage where it exposes how the conceited metafiction, present in most hyperfictions, now mostly consists of clichés. Therefore, it is as intertextual as it is metafictional, because it refers to hypertext theory as often as to itself. The metafiction and philosophising in this hyperfiction will probably not be as tiring or distracting as in the more earnest hyperfictions, because the tone is humorous and ironic and because these ruminations are nestled within the plot.

2. Politics

Politically they generally express left wing sympathies, but preserve an ironic and humorous distance when making political comments. This makes the ideological content seem less intrusive and disruptive to the flow of the story:

There was only one thing we agreed on: we were rabid socialists to a man. Red lions given to rallying and stein-clashing. We lived by slogans. We would baffle Republicans with our ironfisted proclamations that the United States of

America was a socialist state to the core, and always had been. Question was: at whose expense? Free land to white men, immigrant labor.

(/socialists/, 1998)

The Right…whose Contract for America had seemed like a war on America's poor (the 90 percent of the population who owned 10 percent of the wealth loved our anthology, while the richest 10 percent loved our hypertext).

(/dc5/, 1998/)

The political aspect is not very dominating, but the reader is reminded of their democratic and humanitarian views when they 'plant grass with the kids' (/grasswilliam/, 1998) and ridicule conservative views with an ironic essay, supposedly by a conservative freshman, on why they should be banned (/argessay/, 1998).

3. Intertextuality

The hyperfiction also contains an extreme amount of intertextuality. It uses pastiche of literary styles and other writers' voices extensively and it refers almost obsessively to numerous books and people[22]. Especially, as mentioned, beat literature lies as a heavy backdrop behind the whole story.

Any road trip-with-drugs fiction must acknowledge Hunter S. Thompson's contribution to this fleeting genre. Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, […] surely has been, and will continue to be, echoed, knowingly and unknowingly.

(/hsthompson/, 1998)

Reader appeal

Eco's principles will now, very briefly, be used to provide an indication of the kind of reader appeal that *The Unknown* appears to have.

Overall the demands on readers' competences are eased, compared to most other hyperfictions. The clear structure and design ease the ambiguity and the 'contextual and circumstantial selections' that the readers must make. The 'rhetorical and stylistic overcoding' is fairly complex because of the many links and imaginative link structures, but it does not decrease the fiction's appeal much if the reader cannot fully appreciate it, because it still have the fundamental plot drive. Similarly, the ideological overcodings are fairly harmless as they do not seem to have an urge to praise the medium's traits or claim that it is superior to books, and thus readers probably do not feel that it is trying to impose hyperfiction values instead of those of books.

Most importantly the four authors are fundamentally very friendly towards readers with book reading habits. Their 'private codes and ideological biases' are in favour of books and book poetics and thus more conservative readers can feel welcome in their text. Furthermore, the 'expression and content ambiguities' are probably not too challenging for most readers, as the design and narrative frame reduce any uncertainty. Due to the name-dropping, readers are expected to have a wide knowledge of celebrities, authors and other well-known people. Furthermore it is helpful to know

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[22] List of involved names at /somanypeople/

something about literary criticism and literature. But the reader just needs a general knowledge of these things, because they are not central to the fiction in any way.

Thus, the great gap found in the preceding chapter, between the typical model reader of poststructuralist hyperfictions and the actual general preferences of average readers seems to be reduced considerably in the case of *The Unknown*. This is essentially because it has a basic structure of traditional literary conventions that appeals to conservative readers.

Following this brief description of the main themes, the plot, and its probable appeal for average readers, this chapter will now proceed to identify the aesthetics and the innovations that make this hyperfiction special and promising for future hyperfiction.

Innovations and aesthetics

Roughly speaking there are six overall reasons why *The Unknown* is different from most other hyperfictions, including *The Straight* Path and *The Buddha Smiled*:

1. *The Unknown*'s favouring of reckless storytelling over intellectual reflection constitutes an important movement away from the more lyrical and serious hyperfictions/-poems. In *The Unknown* the metafictional and theorising passages are justified and triggered by the fiction – not the other way around.

2. Its 'evocation of a world'[23], its incorporation of real-life famous people and the authors themselves coupled with the fact that it is online and therefore intertwined with the Internet, make it emphasise questions about the relation between fiction and reality to an even larger degree than most other hyperfictions.

3. The powerful frame that it establishes encloses the narrative and always keeps the reader in control, no matter how much it experiments with form within the story. The balance brought by the overall frame is probably the greatest innovation of this hyperfiction, because the fundamental coherence preserves the traditional appeal for average readers but also allows for experimentation with linking and structural elements like multilinearity, multivocality, chronology and spatiality. In addition to the structural frame, the visual and organisational design of the site is also very important for making the reader feel in control.

4. With its multitude of links and its light tone, it encourages a large-scale focus and a reading process similar to Internet surfing, rather than the more local and static close study that other hyperfictions tend to encourage.

5. It is the first comprehensive and ambitious hyperfiction collaboration by four competent authors. Other hyperfictions either have fewer authors or let (author-) readers add to them.

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[23] "[…] what great art, art like Moby Dick, art like Gravity's Rainbow, art like The Gold Bug Variations, what great art does is to evoke nothing less than an entire world" (Scott Rettberg, /aesthetic/)

6. It is probably the largest online, layman's hyperfiction (about 600 book pages). This is theoretically interesting because it is one of the very few thorough attempts to grapple with the problem of attracting a wider array of readers by a more popular approach.

What follows is a more detailed description of these main deviations from standard hyperfiction conventions.

1) The poststructuralist influence and the novelty of the medium has ensured that there is a tendency to emphasise theory over fiction in most hyperfiction. *The Unknown*, however, makes an old-fashioned attempt to tell a good story and let that be the focus of the text. But what style, voice and content is suitable for an online story that aims to entertain?

The four authors of *the Unknown* write in a rambling style, long sentences that go on and on, quickening the pace of reading, almost encouraging skimming ('tmesis' in Barthes' words) or, if the lexia seems too long and rambling, to click a link in search of a better lexia. /dirkspirit/ and /parismiller/ are examples of rather long and rambling lexias. But at the same time, the discursive crudeness imbues the lexias with some of the immediacy and atmosphere that the polished hyperfictions crave. /parismiller/, for example, does not really hold much interesting content, but is just a practise in using Henry Miller's writing style. Once the reader has had enough of the stylistic exercise, he can click a link and leave.

Like other hyperfictions, *The Unknown* contains many intertextual references, but it is not so much references to poststructuralist ideas, as to book authors and literary concepts and styles. They parody authors like Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Julio Cortazar and others. These references address competences within print literature rather than within poststructuralist theory. In fact this hyperfiction is different from most others because it seems to pine for the delights of reading book literature, rather than trying to break with all these values. This produces a sort of backward looking writing with a postmodern twist that functions well within hypertext. Furthermore, The Unknown employ many Pynchonesque pastiches on various genres, as seen in lexias where drama, songs, biography, documentary, poetry, etc. are presented. Their switching between genres, styles and voices ensures that the text does not appear too static or nostalgic for books and utilises the medium's propensity for changeability and multivocality.

With regard to the general style of writing, it seems that the four authors decided to leave the hyperfiction in a kind of 'draft' style. They seem to have let it all come out, perhaps worked it over once or twice and then left it as it was, preserving its immediacy and rawness, rather than risk losing the freshness by polishing and rounding it off it too much. As William Gillespie, one of the authors, says in an email to the other authors:

So why is drivil bad? The hypertext is probably full of it, whatever it is, since I think we've only erased one page since the day we started.

(William Gillespie, /aesthetic2/, 1998)

This opinion is supported in a lexia called /heretical/:

But sometimes, just sometimes, what a text really needs is bulk. As in lots of words.

(/heretical/, 1998)

Thus, the style is more towards the Beat poets than Hemingway, which seems to suit the medium's 'push' on the reader. It seems, as Birkerts has also noted, that elements like the disembodied reading situation (no tangible thing in one's hand), the screen and links, encourage movement more than contemplation in this medium. One is never as relaxed and comfortable in front of the computer as when sitting with a book, which furthers the urge to move on, to be active in order to sustain any immersion. Therefore, the rambling writing style suits the medium well, as it sometimes seems to create a certain fascination to click links until reaching some interesting passages. This kind of hyperfiction reading is similar to the reading patterns of Internet surfing, which is very much about knowing what *not* to read. The more common solemn and lyrical hyperfictions that economise with words and have fewer links do not have this 'surf appeal' and instead disrupt a fast, flowing reading by demanding close attention to each word. It thus seems plausible that *The Unknown* is right in encouraging a fast, flowing reading in a medium as erratic as hypertext, while more taciturn hyperfictions, like *Rice*, *The Buddha Smiled*, or *The Straight Path* and many others on the Internet try to impose a reading pattern on readers that does not seem natural to them in a medium as erratic as hypertext.

The unassuming and relaxed atmosphere of the hyperfiction also arises because the authors do not seem to have had much 'serious' theoretical or ideological intention with it. It is often infantile in its tone and is, as they sometimes remark, first and foremost written to amuse themselves. It is obvious, judging from the photographs included on the site and the mild mannered banter, that they had, as they never forget to assure us, a 'ton of fun' writing it. The story of course holds most fun for those who know the main characters in real life. It would, however, be a mistake to soften the local and personal dimension, because it gives the story its atmosphere of authenticity and warmth in contrast to the hyperfictions that refer to more general issues or theory. The reader senses and understands much of the teasing going on between them, because it is implied in the tone of voice. Here are a couple of their references to a co-author's character traits:

He [William] had become mean and withdrawn. He abused waiters, waitresses, and stewardesses with a regularity that we had come to expect only from Dirk, who had become accustomed to being a living messiah with great expectations and a lot of "needs."

(/bungie/, 1998)

Now, if you know William, you know he's a man of few words even when he does talk.

(/sanfranfrank/, 1998)

As said, this hedonistic, literary joyriding would not by first glance constitute worthwhile literature, but after reading it for a while the world of the four bookworms becomes interesting, not just because the story has drive, but also because one glimpses the real life of the authors in between the wild yarns. As information about the authors seep through the story, the whole project really becomes a biography about four college graduates who write about their dream of being famous writers who tour the world doing readings from their work. The inclusion of information about themselves is one of the most important features of this hyperfiction because it lends colour and an element of human interest to the story and makes the question of fact in relation to fiction so interesting. For all the reader knows, *The Unknown* might as well have been written by someone who invented all the characters and inserted false "documentary" elements. It demonstrates to us how hard it can be to determine what is truth and what is fiction and that sometimes those questions become irrelevant. As opposed to expressing warnings about the nature of discourse explicitly, it is better to exemplify how treacherous discourse can be by making the questions present themselves

through pushing the nature of the discursive elements to extremes (clearly setting obviously fictional events up against what seems to be fact). Many hyperfictions tend to explicitly warn the reader about how the power structures and human discourse work:

Because it is an imperative for the great machine of civilisation to still the individual voice, to discredit everything that fails to fall in line with its bar-coded version of reality.
If you are part of the machine, you must subscribe to certain basic ideas. The machine's apologists term them 'values'.

(*The Buddha Smiled*, /lastword/, 1999)

The Unknown also sometimes explain explicitly about metaphysical and theoretical ideas, but they put them in separate lexias, under the heading 'metafictional bullshit', with distinct purple frames that separate them from the fiction. Furthermore, they keep an ironic distance to their observations and do not emphasise them and generally treat them as seriously as most other hyperfiction authors. They assume that the reader is aware, even tired, of 'metafictional bullshit' and consequently do not try to impose them on him by weaving them closely into the fiction. Consequently, as noted earlier, it is to a higher degree up to the reader to realise any relations between fiction and non-fiction, text and world, because it is not so much explicitly told as it is demonstrated. In this matter they follow the old writing rule 'show it, don't tell it'.

2) The extreme lack of respect for any distinction between truth and fiction is also what lends *The Unknown* another rare effect. It contains an all-encompassing world of all kinds of information, true or not, related to the authors, and is thus horizontally motivated according to Marie-Laure Ryan's definition of two kinds of literature (1991, p. 150). Ryan defines literature as horizontally motivated when the story's theme and basis lie within the fictional plot, as a subordinate to the plot's temporal order. Causal relationships play a larger part in this kind of literature, which make it appealing to many people used to traditional literature. Vertical motivation is more characteristic of the poststructuralist, avant-garde hyperfictions, because their plots are often realised through transcending principles and issues. These hyperfictions, like *The Straight Path* and *The Buddha Smiled*, appeal to larger categories, like postructuralist principles or Islam, which are known to many readers, but clearly outside the story. The fact that many hyperfictions tend to be vertically motivated is important when considering the reasons why their reader appeal is so weak.

The Unknown, however, seems to exist in its own dimension outside any normal boundaries of truth and fiction, which creates an enclosure with blurry borders containing an environment which the reader can more easily relate to. He quickly recognises the "rules" of the fictional world that *The Unknown* erects and comes to terms with the blurring of fiction and truth, producing a sense of how relative the concepts of truth and fiction can be. Furthermore, they use their 'constructed reality' to parody stock criticism and its predictability by using what are supposedly others' voices to criticise their own hyperfiction. The authors are very ironic about poststructuralism's and hypertext theory's commonplaces and never hesitate to state the standard conclusions that can be made about their own text's connotations. Their ironic tone and their direct criticism show that they, as mentioned earlier, find ruling doctrines of hyperfiction writing and interpretation too predictable. They practise pseudo- and meta-criticism rather than metafiction, which produces an ironic intellectualisation of what, according to themselves, is mainly just a text written for fun and to promote an anthology that may not be published after all. Here are abstracts from some of the "reviews":

(A mock-feminist critique):

She [Angela McRobbie] could have been talking about the representations found in The Unknown that, thanks to its digressions, links, dialogues, and more links, cut and paste a white male world that exists partly in the imagination and partly in the real life road show of four authors who trumpet their virility almost as often as they do their writing.

(/femcritique/, 1998)

(Quoting made-up sources in a suggestion for a paper topic for students):

The Hypertext of the Unknown has been called "one of the most challenging works of the late late twentieth century." Some critics have called it, "exuberant and revitalizing" while others have said it is "juvenile and sophmoric." One critic named George Will even called it "dangerous."

(/papertopics/, 1998)

(Said by "Michael Berube" in a conversation with the Unknown):

[…] its juxtaposition of the techniques of the PR genre with that of modernist referentiality and the encyclopedic approach of the great systems novelist and the metafictional techniques of a Barth or a Pynchon . . . The ontological uncertainty, the shifts in voices and points of view . . . I hope I'm not bringing the coals to Newcastle when I say that in terms of theory, from a cultural studies standpoint, the inclusion, of course, of the varied materialia of hetereoglossic pop culture, all simply amazing.

(/berubedialogue/, 1998)

This ironic third person critique of their own work creates a less formal atmosphere, and helps to keep the theoretical speculation from getting too much influence. They caricature the standard views that could be had about their hyperfiction, prevent it from becoming too serious and helps it reach the next stage of hyperfiction aesthetics. This is when the dream of poststructuralism applied in practise has become worn out and more practical writers instead try to combine the aesthetics that seems to work within the medium, regardless if they are traditional, enlightenment values or subversive, experimental ones. Thus, the standard poststructuralist elements are parodied by The Unknown of hyperfiction, as seen in for example *The Buddha Smiled.*

But it is only human to hope that a story will end meaningfully, even when it is a story about meaninglessness

(/lastword/, 1999)

But The Unknown, in contrast to the many earnest hyperfiction authors, seem just as interested in popular culture as in philosophy and literary theory. The frequent name dropping in the hyperfiction gives it a wider frame of reference and a fairly efficient hook because curiosity is always aroused when celebrities are mentioned and it creates amusing situations when people like Ted Turner, the Clinton family and other celebrities are put in bizarre contexts. Furthermore, the references to real-life characters and places complicate the dichotomy between fiction and reality further. In the grand context of the whole *Unknown* Internet site there is no way of knowing truth from fiction. The reader is continually in doubt whether names and titles really exist and may feel an urge to look names and titles up somewhere else. The name 'Krass-Mueller', for example comes up often in the hyperfiction, as if referring to someone of great importance in academic circles, but when one looks it up on the Internet, even the home pages of the university he is supposed to be a lecturer at, there is no information on it and, judging from this remark, they seem to have made the name up:

I don't know who Krass-Mueller is, but the name alone suggests intensity, daring, and intelligence of a rare sort.

(/krassmueller/, 1998)

Furthermore, they both call themselves as a group and the site for 'The Unknown', which emphasises how intertwined the world of the creators and that of their creation are.

Note how there has always been a conflation between The Unknown, the hypertext, and the Unknown, the authors of the hypertext. We are the creature, and the creature is us.

(/hard_code9/, 2000)

The Unknown is a dismembered four-way auto/biography- with prosthetic appendages. The mixture of authentic personal correspondence and hallucinatory fiction is made all the more haunting by a floating authorship - sometimes an individual, always a subset of the group.

(/hard_code8/, 2000)

The inclusion of all the real parts is one of the reasons why the hyperfiction manages to touch its reader. Judging from many personal reading experiences, hyperfictions in general have a problem connecting with its readers, but this one is so down to earth, easily approachable and uses a very personal angle which makes it easier to relate to.

3) With its enormous amount of links and elaborate link-structures, the authors of *The Unknown* definitely utilise the interactive potential of hyperfiction to a satisfying degree. In contrast to many other hyperfictions, it has a very comprehensive and elaborate linking structure, but it still manages to keep readers oriented and in control, principally because it offers a clear, situating frame around the narrative. This way The Unknown are able to experiment with linking structures without loosing the reader too much. For example, Scott Rettberg, one of the authors experimented with what he calls a "linguistic" link:

More arbitrary linguistic links can also be used to interesting effect. […] I selected particular words and phrases such as "explain" or "mean and withdrawn," and connected every instance of their utterance to another instance of their utterance.

(/owlhypertext/, 1999)

There are about 6 linked instances where William is "mean and withdrawn". This alternative way of connecting text elements does not throw the reader off because it is imbedded in a larger perspective. It provides a new angle, with William as the centre, on what happens, and the changing centres (it is also done with the word "beer") help to create a more varied reading experience, which can provide novel realisations about the characters or other elements of the story. In addition to this innovative use of linking, Scott Rettberg mentions other innovative aesthetic effects that some link-types create in *The Unknown*.

***Link as P.O.V. Shifting Device
A link can serve as a device which shifts the point of view in the narrative. Say we are sitting in the cabin of the ship, and the Belge detective is grilling Mrs. Mallarme about her whereabouts the night of the murder, and the butler and the captain and the scullerymaid are all in the room as well, we could make links with their names, and then shift to their perception of the events.

***Link as Comic Subversion
Links can also serve a comic function within a hypertext fiction. Say you have a scene in which a preacher is railing mightily against the sinners of the world, and names sloth, gluttony, avarice, etc. You could link from each of those phrases to scenes in which the preacher is himself engaged in those acts, undermining the previous narrative.

***Link as Line Break/Double Entendre
In a poem, a line break can serve as a multiplier of meaning. In a poem, the last word of the line often means one thing when you finish that line, and an entirely different thing after you have read the line, which follows it. Say in a poem, you have a couple of lines like, ah:
And I have climbed to the top of that mountain
Of lies and seen what a mole hill you've left me
Similarly, within a hypertext, you could be within a scene about a young pilot's dream of flight, and click on say "soaring" and jump to a scene in which that pilot is soaring into the side of a mountain.

(/owlhypertext/, 1999)

The experiments with link-poetics is enough to refute criticism by more radical hypertext enthusiasts who find it too conservative because it provides an overall framework and stabilises the reading experience to a higher degree than most other hyperfictions. It manages to innovate and experiment with linking techniques and inspires others to just write what they like and play with the formal possibilities of the medium. It thus provides a much-needed encouragement to go 'back to basics' and just write for pleasure. The four authors show how everyone, including those without much knowledge of literary theory or book literature, can create imaginative, appealing hyperfiction.

This experimentation with narrative effects of course also takes place in other hyperfictions, but the fundamental stability of *The Unknown* allows the reader to concentrate more on the subtle details and the structural experimentation of the narrative rather than on understanding the basic meaning of it all. What provides this surplus of interpretive energy is the efficiency of the framework. The principles of this framework brings those of oral storytelling to mind, because it has several authors who contribute with various stories, which are then tied together, as if they pass the word on to each other.

One of its more impressive achievements is to locate a frame (the endless tour) that allows for a great range of wildly variant stories without need of a linear chronology, always naggingly troublesome to a hyperfiction.

(Robert Coover, /presskit/trace/, 1998)

The visual design of the frame is just as important as the narrative one for keeping the balance between a traditional kind of discourse and experimenting with new ways of structuring a story. As mentioned, there are 12 buttons under each lexia that offer topical overviews and various possibilities for the reader. Some of them provide the reader with various ways of approach to the fiction. He can choose to read it by looking at a map and clicking various localities to see what happened in that particular spot, or he can start with the metaphysical comments, or the email correspondence, or a famous name. This produces an encyclopaedic text in which the reader can find various points of departure for his explorations. The frame around the lexia is coloured according to the nature of the text. The reader knows that he is a reading a comment on the hypertext itself, or reflections in general, if the frame of the lexia is purple. Likewise, he knows that the story takes place in lexias with a red frame. Consequently, the visual design of the hyperfiction plays an extremely important role in controlling the hypertextual propensity for anarchy. The colours allow writers to associatively mix fiction, non-fiction, metaphysical reflections, private correspondence and other varieties of writing and still keep the reader oriented about the nature of each lexia.

4) The imaginative way links are used and the great role they play is also an interesting feature of this hyperfiction. They are very rarely applied randomly, but almost always seem to be related to

what they lead to. It is as if the authors say "and that reminds me of…" every time a word brings up the memory of another story. Here, for example, the writer is reminded of another situation when he mentions *Purple Rain*.

[…] the tape, which was *Are You Experienced* backed with <u>Purple Rain</u>.[…]

(/Alaska/, 1998)

Clicking *Purple Rain* leads to:

[…]
Too often that year, we took the advice of The Artist Formerly Known as Prince, and partied like it was 1999.
[…]

(/1999/, 1998)

This enormous network of connections between little stories make it interesting to surf for good stories and the reading experience becomes just as much about movement as about reading. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as illustrated by *The Unknown*. It goes with the flow of the medium and encourages the reader to move on, to get an experience of the totality of it as much as the fine points. Thus, *The Unknown*, compared to other hyperfictions, reduces the emphasis on the local elements and increases the large-scale awareness. The reading experience thus more clearly becomes 'the structure of possible structures' that Bolter (1991, p. 143) talk about – a sense of the totality of it all.

5) *The Unknown* clearly illustrates the lengths collaborative writing can be taken to. This mode of composition works as long as the contributors are skilled writers and there is a generally agreed upon plotline and frame. Having multiple authors also adds colour and variation, which are badly needed features in hyperfiction. It is difficult for the reader to distinguish who writes what in the jungle of voices and styles, especially when they parody others' styles, but it becomes irrelevant to identify the voices – a sense of a collective body of narrators arises instead.

(Me is William here, of course. He's always horning in on the first person. Though he speaks, generally, for our collective "I" as well. These kinds of distinctions are irrelevant in such a text as this. At some point the text itself loses consciousness.)

(/mewilliam/, 1998)

The combination of a very strong narrative frame and the writers' fairly homogeneous mentalities and styles of writing produces a text that is fairly coherent and stable. Had the authors been widely different in background and culture, for instance a Chinese writing with an American, the text would be more uneven. But in this case their similar background and common literary education at the University of Cincinatti help to ensure a consistency and decent level of writing throughout the text.

To have four authors working together is actually one of the more poststructuralist features of the hyperfiction. It works against the sense of authorial superiority and separateness. And, as said, the reader rarely knows for sure who wrote the lexia he is reading and all the different voices blend into one that somehow has less weight than if it had belonged to one person. It is also very important that they use themselves as characters in the story because it shows them as what they are: ordinary people just like the reader. This, coupled with the fact that the reader can email them if he pleases makes the authors seem less dictatorial than in many of the hyperfictions that only have one author and perhaps no possibility for emailing him.

6) It is definitely one of the most ambitious layman's hyperfictions, with no reservations about trying to captivate the reader and thus try to break with an influential belief in hypertext theory, namely that hyperfiction is anti-immersive by nature. It proves that it is possible to create captivating hyperfiction if the authors have no reservations about trying to appeal directly, through humour and familiar situations, to the more affective sides of the reader. Its comprehensive and varied fictional world offers the reader short intervals of immersion in the lexias holding particularly interesting writing. In most other online hyperfictions (i.e. *The Buddha Smiled* and *The Straight Path*) there is little chance of immersion in the traditional way possible with books. These hyperfictions' authors do not even attempt to try to seduce the reader into a state of immersion. As mentioned, some Internet literature and -poetry work more like essays with a little narrative content thrown in to illustrate the theoretical ideas that the essay/fiction is supposed to test. The main problem for many readers is thus that the stories' basic appeal is not sufficient to let them involve themselves in the narrative. The stories and plots of most hyperfictions need more clarity and extent before they offer enough raw materials for the reader to build on and become fascinated by. But the great extent of *The Unknown*, the great number of events, names and places, lets the reader become involved in the story because he can get a feeling of reaching an intimate understanding of the characters. As Scott Rettberg says:

what great art does is to evoke nothing less than an entire world, a world with details and nuances and layers and cross-references in and out of itself. As to how we could achieve something similar in the realm of a hypertext novel in which there were already characters w/our names--well, why not include simulacra of our "real selves" as well?

(/aesthetic/, 1998)

As noted earlier, the authors use one of the oldest narrating techniques around, by making a book tour the setting for their short, semi-autonomous stories. Every town brings a new story, as every traveller does it in *Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer, 1957) composed in the fourteenth century. Their action-packed and humorous rampage through city after city proves that this narrative model still works within the computer medium and even seems to strike a good connection between old, oral storytelling traditions and the new features of the hypertext medium

It is important to bear in mind that the discursive revolution has no effect if no one knows about it, so in order to make people join, it needs to offer them something desirable, which they can understand. With its popularising effect, *The Unknown* fulfils the important function of attracting and initiating many readers who would not normally be attracted to hyperfiction. The hyperfiction has been online for about 2_ years now and many readers have seen it by now, probably mainly because its lexias sometimes pop up when people search the World Wide Web for 'feminism', 'Bill Gates' or some of the many other famous names that is included in the fiction. This 'high jacking' of readers is interesting, because they enter the hyperfiction assuming that they are going to find facts on a specific person, concept or place. Instead, they are lured into reading a fictional account where the sought-for, well-known elements exist in an alternative world.

Breaks with (Poststructuralist) Hyperfiction Conventions

The Unknown goes against the poststructuralist aesthetics of most other hyperfictions on central points: It has a fundamental coherence and fairly distinguishable borders: an optional starting lexia (/default/), and a closing one (/theend/, 2001). It does not have the serious tone of other hyperfictions and does not pretend to be exposing or improving human discourse (books in

particular). It speaks lovingly of books and is not afraid to combine the values of the two art forms in order to create a good story.

Our understanding of hypertext was more based on the ideas of writers who wrote books than the ideas of those who wrote hypertext, or wrote about hypertext.

<div align="right">(Rettberg, 1999)</div>

Furthermore, in contrast to poststructuralist theory's advocacy of the postmodern, "healthy" disorientation, *The Unknown* rarely leaves the reader deeply confused about the structure or meaning of the whole thing. There is a feeling of coherence in the fiction, because the linking is fairly logical and the type of discourse has a familiar feeling to it. Furthermore, there are little sequences of directly connected lexias that have a classic build-up of suspense. For example, towards what must be the end, there are three connected lexias, from /laparty/ through /la2Kread/ and /ladirkdeath/, letting the reader end up in /dirkspirit/.

Another conventional, and for hyperfiction in general, very unusual element The Unknown have chosen to include is a definite conclusion of the story. It happens in a lexia called /theend/.

You have reached the last page of the Unknown. You can breath a sigh of relief. You've completed the entire novel.

<div align="right">(/theend/, 2001)</div>

The reader can indeed breath a sigh of relief, as he does not have to search for an ending, but can relax with a feeling, not of frustration with the still unsettled world of *The Unknown*, but with more satisfaction and readiness to read the next hyperfiction. In addition to this concluding lexia, there are, as noted before, several postscript-lexias called /denouement/, /Vienna/, /eighties/, /eighties2/ and /eighties3/ that tie up most of the loose ends and further helps the reader leave it with a feeling of completion.

[…]
Dirk and Scott, surprisingly, put their (ABD) doctoral degrees and their vast knowledge of critical theory to work to end the war in Kosovo, calling for an end to "identity politics bullshit." Now, schoolchildren in Kosovo, regardless of their ethnicity, take mandatory Albanian and Serbian history and language classes, and ethnic strife is already far less severe in Yugoslavia than in Chicago.
And Paul Auster called me up to apologize for cheating at shuffleboard
 […]
But his tone of voice sounded like he was swearing revenge . . .

<div align="right">(/denouement/, 1998)</div>

Apart from including an ending, The Unknown also breaks with ruling hyperfiction conventions by saying outright that they do not wish to let the ideals of hypertext theory influence their writing.

And so far, my (meaning Dirk's) contributions have been far too theoretical--time for the heretical.

<div align="right">(/text/, 1998)</div>

As mentioned, there are passages where they caricature how poststructuralist doctrines seem to have now become empty phrases known by heart by academics. Dirk Stratton, one of the authors, says it straight out:

[…]
D: Already, I can tell you that our hypertext is critiquing regular hypertext. Because--despite hypertext's pretensions towards liberating literature from linear time, and from authoritative foundationalism, in fact, every hypertext that I know of has only one author, anyway. Even though that author sets up multiple paths, it really comes down to a singular creator, separate from the reader, blah blah blah. The same old Western bullshit. […]

(/transcript3/, Dirk Stratton, 1998)

By its distinguishing colours the reader can easily distinguish what kind of lexia he encounters, putting him in control to a degree hitherto unseen in large hyperfictions. This control is what makes the reading lighter, leaving more room for following the plot and immersion in the fictional world. Creating a world full of stories and information of all kinds that seem to be able to exist on its own terms is exactly what other hyperfictions have tended to avoid. They rarely seem to try to establish a fictional world that has no intrusion from "reality", because they have an urge to always remind the reader of discourse's treacherous nature and of hypertext's liberating potential. Mark Bernstein wonders why more authors do not write more conventional hyperfictions for his Eastgate Company to publish.

I know of no really good hypertext mysteries, in Eastgate's catalog or anyone else's. (A few promising titles are forthcoming, especially Chris Willerton's *Londale Hotel,* but that doesn't help readers right now.) This disappoints many readers and astounds reporters and media insiders -- especially film industry folk, to whom interactive mysteries seem to promise instant box office.

(Bernstein, 2000)

The Unknown shows Bernstein and others that hyperfiction can contain traditional genres and still conduct interesting experiments with multiple authors, fiction vs. reality, sound clips, different ways of linking and with mixing styles and genres. It shows that mainstream hyperfiction is a viable art form, which, with tighter plots and more suspense than is the case in *The Unknown*, can produce exciting reading. In short it shows that hyperfiction written with the simple intention of having fun can sometimes be more innovative than the more forced hyperfictions produced according to a theoretic ideal. As the author of mainstream hyperfiction *The Heist*, Walter Sorrells says:

Well, I confess to having a weakness for theory, myself. But good theory usually makes for bad art.

(1998)

Perhaps *The Unknown* has come across as a rather conservative hyperfiction in this chapter, but this is not the case. It is just as subversive as the more ambiguous and explicitly experimental hyperfictions, just not in the same way as most of them. Instead of the almost obligatory rebellion against the traditional literary conventions, this hyperfiction turns against its own. It is critical towards ruling hyperfiction poetics and theory, but is not simple genre literature. It conducts its own experiments with linking and 'genre bending' as Walter Sorrells calls it.

When I sat down to write THE HEIST, I very consciously used a classic crime novel type, the caper, as my starting point. I suppose this was an exercise in, what...genre-bending or something. What I mean is that I wanted to take a very proven type of story, one that works really neatly in linear text, and see how it worked in the context of a non-linear form.

So there was actually a bit of theoretical engine under the hood of this project.

(Sorrells, *Reactive Writing*, 1998)

Like Sorrells, the authors attempt to fit traditional genre elements into an electronic environment and this kind of experimentation should be applauded just as much as the poststructuralist attempts to break down literary conventions. Actually this kind of experimentation may be more constructive than the determined attempts to throw all the old values out and replace them with new ones. This The kind of experimentation that The Unknown conduct is more in line with Gene Ashe's call for 'micro-changes', because it starts by finding out which traditional elements actually work well in the new medium and then work towards developing a popular hyperfiction genre that also utilises the unique features of hyperfiction.

Conclusion

> Maybe more importantly, a lot of hypertext fiction is self-consciously arty ... and hugely boring; so I wanted to poke a thumb in the eye of the high-tone approach by using the grungiest, least respectable, most blue-collar form I could think of. In other words I wanted it to be light-hearted, accessible and entertaining.
>
> Walter Sorrells in interview (1998)

The last two chapters have established that 1) the nature of the model reader of most poststructuralist hyperfictions precludes most other people than academic theorists from becoming fascinated by them and 2) that more mainstream hyperfictions can use both traditional and new elements and still be ground-breaking.

This conclusion will sum up some general differences between an audience-oriented hyperfiction and two hyperfictions that do not seem to consider attracting a wide audience to be the first priority and establish that a mainstream hyperfiction like *The Unknown* can sometimes utilise the medium better in terms of cultivating the entertainment potential and the art form in general, than the hyperfictions written more or less according to poststructuralist prescriptions.

The conclusion sums up two things on the basis of the preceding pages: Firstly it shows the possible reasons why first generation hyperfictions like *The Straight Path* and *The Buddha Smiled* do not appeal to a wide audience. Secondly it lists the reasons why *The Unknown* manages to appeal to more people and break with the ruling first generation poetics that have dominated hypertext writing, suppressing other styles.

It then concludes, as an answer to the subtitle of this paper, that it is indeed possible to make popular hyperfictions that are also innovative. Authors may experiment with the medium, but because of the increased work that readers must perform when reading it they must have rewards, or 'breathing spaces', in the form of more traditional, compelling elements of suspense, romance, sex, humour, action etc. Thus, hyperfiction may have a future as a popular art form if it will meet readers half way.

Probable reasons why *The Straight Path* and *The Buddha Smiled* do not appear to achieve wide popularity:

- They basically have no plot and very little drive and thus place very high demands on the patience and adaptability of their model reader.

- They are vertically motivated, that is, their stories are dependent on transcending issues. They expect their reader to be very interested in general issues like Islam, the nuclear threat or hypertext theory.

- *The Straight Path* in particular, similarly to many hyperfictions, want the reader to be extremely inner-directed, that is, to modify all his usual reading patterns and try to make meaning from content that is so ambiguous and incoherent that its structure, with its repetitions and autonomous phrases, almost does not qualify as fiction, but sometimes reminds one more of avant-garde poetry.

- They lack any plot drive whatsoever, demanding that the reader is extremely patient and that the story itself has second priority for him.

- They generally complicate the interpretation process very much by making a very demanding 'presuppositional effort' and demands that the reader should share a familiarity with the medium and a considerable enthusiasm for its structural and theoretical possibilities.

- They have very few links, slowing down the reading process and preventing any 'surf-reading', which seems to produce a better connection with the reader.

- *The Buddha Smiled* and many other first generation hyperfictions tend to include much metafictional reflection and comparisons between hypertext traits and the true nature of discourse. These elements are in danger of becoming a cliché of the genre and make the hyperfiction seem more like an essay than a fiction.

- The almost total lack of designations of specific contextual and circumstantial selections in *The Straight Path* makes it very hard for the reader to feel comfortable with it. It provides almost no information about temporal, spatial or causal circumstances, making the hyperfiction seem superficial and free-floating, with nothing to give the plot and story any weight. Most reader's competences in making these selections are undoubtedly insufficient, because the information is simply too sparse and then readers feel lost and invest very little of themselves in the story.

Probable Reasons why The Unknown Seems to Have a Wider Appeal:

- It has a clear desire to tell stories and a certain plot-drive. It basically puts storytelling first, which gives it both more hook and lasting appeal than the other two hyperfictions.

- Its use of pop-icons and the authors themselves as characters gives it an immediacy and familiarity that removes some of the alienation and remoteness that the medium seems to produce.

- Its narrative and formal frame situates the reader and anchors the experience, which is crucial for any deep involvement with the story. Disorientation alienates and disrupts the flow of reading (as proved by many hyperfictions, for example *Projection* (Powhilda, 1998)).

- Its many links and draft-like quality encourages an irreverent form of reading that utilises the medium's capacity for rapid changes and allows the reader to move on when he feels the reading becomes too static. Its extreme amount of links and its light tone break with the style of all the more dry and earnest hyperfictions (*Life in the Chocolate Mountains*, *Twelve Blue*).

- The presence of four different character/authors makes it all more varied and unpredictable and gives it more edge and warmth because the close real-life relations between the four authors are obvious. It is also the most thorough use of multiple authors, proving that it can be a viable way of composing hyperfiction.

- It does not presume that its form of discourse is superior to books and rather uses hypertext features to enhance book values and the reading experience.

- It has a fundamental coherence. The linking is associative, with reasonably logical meaning to their connection. There are also short sequences of directly connected lexias that build suspense.

- It is horizontally motivated, which means that it mainly bases it content on events that are nestled within the fiction and not so much on outside issues.

- It uses links in new, imaginative ways that can make the storytelling more colourful, varied and unpredictable, like the ways described by Scott Rettberg[24].

- Its intricate blend of fiction and real emails and facts about the author/characters produce an environment where the values of truth and fiction are even more questionable and central than in many other hyperfictions.

- Another conventional, and for hyperfiction in general, very unusual element that The Unknown have chosen to include is a definite ending of the story and an opening lexia that the reader will meet if he clicks the title. The ending resolves it all and the reader is allowed to leave the hyperfiction without being frustrated about the lack of closure.

- Its pragmatic approach and humour disarm many readers. The Unknown, in contrast to most hyperfiction authors' adherence to poststructuralist theory, caricature ruling literary and hyperfiction theory and it is said outright that 'too much' theory is not good. They differ from many first generation hypertexts because they will not let the ideals of hypertext theory overrule any of their ideas.

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[24] Link as P.O.V. Shifting Device, Link as Comic Subversion, Link as Line Break/Double Entendre (/owlhypertext/, 1999)

In addition to this wide appeal, *The Unknown*, as shown in chapter four is also innovative and subversive. It devises new narrative poetics and breaks with both dogmatic structuralist rules and literary conventions. The reluctance to employ most of the just mentioned features in most hyperfictions is a possible reason why hyperfiction has not gained any considerable popularity, but still remains an underground art form. It is indeed difficult to see how an art form that inherently demands so much effort, attention and involvement of the reader will ever compete with other media. Hyperdrama author Charles Deemer has already proclaimed that popular hyperfiction is doomed:

I am not sure hyperfiction has a future at all - or if so, it will continue to be on two extreme fronts: games entertainment on the one hand and eclectic even snobbish postmodern academic mumbojumbo on the other. I have a hard time imagining "a popular hypertext novel." I'm not sure readers want to do the WORK that it takes to read hypertext fiction. […] Hyperfiction requires a lot of decision-making from the reader, and I'm not sure the reading public is up to it.

(1996)

But it is too early to say if he is right or not, because there simply has not been written enough hyperfictions that attempt to prove him wrong.

But now the dissemination of Internet access promises to let a wider field of authors try their hand at writing hyperfiction and, in addition to *The Unknown*, some mainstream online hyperfictions have existed on the Internet for a while now (*The Heist*, *Under the Ashes*, *Lies*[25]). Furthermore, as more and more hyperfiction prize competitions crop up, more and more kinds of people will get an extra incitement to try their hand at hyperfiction authoring. For example a newly established organisation called the Electronic Literature Organisation established by Scott Rettberg organise an annual prize competition for electronic fiction and poetry with 2 awards of 10,000 dollars each. Hyperfiction writing, it seems, is not past its golden age. It is just getting started.

Most likely hypertext theory and poststructuralism's hold over authors will weaken when they realise that more spontaneous hyperfictions are actually more original, creative and surprising because they use the medium to fit their own personal whims. Scott Rettberg's words about his and his friends' approach to writing *The Unknown* illustrate the difference between *The Unknown* and more theory-oriented hyperfictions well:

We didn't know that the link was [supposed to be] a dead end, so we played with it.

(1999, emphasis mine)

The last five words illustrate the important point that the earnest hyperfiction authors forget in their determination to expose the drawbacks of print literature, namely to play with meanings and not always write in order to reach an overriding goal (to break with book poetics). They should remember to enjoy the journey of writing just as they want the reader to enjoy the journey of reading, rather than look for closure. The fact that the playful *The Unknown* appeals to a wide audience *and* contributes to developing new hyperfiction poetics hopefully means that it, and hyperfictions like it, will help rid its genre of its reputation of being nostalgic and reactionary and encourage more writers to try some 'genre-bending'. 'The reading public' Deemer talks about will be up to reading hyperfiction if the rewards to be had are big enough. The saying 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy' is true also in the case of hyperfiction. Therefore, when the

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[25] Found at www.tardis.ed.ac.uk/~krynoid/hypfic.html

hyperfiction contains more immediately engaging events and emotions and creates more intimacy, which is what this medium desperately needs, then readers will probably be more drawn to it.

The trial period of hyperfiction has expired – it is time to see if it can attract a sizeable audience.

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