

Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus

Tess Brady

Interrogating Authorship: Students Writing Hypertext

Abstract:

This paper explores some of the challenges facing writers working in hypertext. It does so by focussing on a third year creative arts student project, lead by the CD ROM artist Richard Jones. The project produced the CD ROM Artyfact.

The situation: Artyfact

A group of ten third year Creative Arts students taking Drama, Art and Writing worked for a semester with the award winning cyber-artist, Richard Jones producing the CD ROM *Artyfact*, a playful documentary style product looking at life as a student studying degrees offered at our campus.

Artyfact consists of an interface page which leads onto four different worlds. In each of these the viewer can select the views and thoughts of a particular student or staff member by clicking the mouse on an ear or a nose, a hand or an eye. Once into the student's or staff member's page the viewer can further explore film clip interviews and animated collages/artworks/poems. Movement between the individual pages, the worlds and the interface page, is easy and fluid.

While the students had a motley collection of computer and film skills they were well versed in problem solving and they all positioned themselves as "creative". They had some experience in working in groups but the group work tended to be area specific, such as a large visual art work or a performance piece.

These ten students were joined by three others, one of these was taking a visual arts subject to backfill in her multimedia degree where she had been struggling. She ended up doing most of the programming and became known as Lynell, the Techno Goddess. The other two students were from Scandinavia, on a study abroad scheme; one of these had considerable film experience.

Various others hovered around the edges of the project.

The students were required to write a small exegesis. With permission, I have quoted from those papers.

Hypertext as Non Linear

Hypertext, the basis for the CD ROM and much of what is talked about in Web authoring, is a form of construction that deliberately sabotages the linear structure of the printed book. Kelly (1994:463) refers to its thinking as 'telegraphic, modular, nonlinear, malleable, cooperative'. By using something like the mouse a reader of hypertext can move effortlessly from section to section, image to text, in a fluid manner but in a sequence that another reader may never repeat. This nonlinear structure was the first aspect of hypertext that the students needed to navigate.

Nadine, who took on the role of 'gofer' recognised the nature of the CD ROM structure but this was not done easily. She needed to break through what at times was quite an emotional resistance to the fractured nature of hypertext. She wrote:

Being a gofer allowed me to encompass all aspects of the project, which nobody else had the opportunity of doing. I worked in a non linear fashion, like a CD ROM, working quite closely with the concept team, and pre and post production teams. So I was able to understand each piece of the puzzle and put it together in my head, and I have a sound understanding of the structure, which worked in spirals not straight lines.

Ben, who was the director of the video shoot, came to realise the importance of this fragmentation. He wrote:

Because the audience will be able to play with our product, by choosing where to begin and finish their journey through the five worlds (sections/chapters) we've created. When shooting we had to consider what this would mean in terms of linearity. Basically, the audience may not see all the video, maybe only a fraction will be activated by a person. The hours worth of

video they have to choose from will more than likely be assembled and viewed in a different order every time it's played. So as an Editor I had to choose concise and independent statements that related the subject to their world (section/chapter). We asked them to give their intimate stories while shooting, and I feel they're speaking on their own behalf, in short spurts, allows for this style of fragmentary narrative and, what's more, excites the audience as they get a sense of exploration and discovery.

A Question of Authorship

It is widely suggested that because the reader of a CD ROM can fragment the text in a variety of ways, they, in their reading process, contribute to the authorship of the text. Readers construct hybrid and new documents by creating links between sections of the hypertext.

These are not new ideas. What however needs to be stressed in this paper is the fervour with which these notions of the reader as author are generated in hypertext discussions, and consequentially, find an expression in the practice of hypertext writing. Snyder writes: (1996:64)

The absence of textual autonomy and textual centredness impacts inevitably upon conceptions of authorship. In the unboundedness and openness of the new textuality made available by hypertext, the author is dispersed.

'Dispersed' is an ugly term and a fate many of the writing students found difficult to embrace. Kelli, the student who became the art director of the project, comments:

There was an initial confusion as to what a 'writer' was on a CD ROM. When someone referred to a writer, it meant concept people, not the former definition we had come to know as a poet or a playwright.

Woolley (1992:153) further elaborates on the reader/author role in hypertext, claiming that via the fragmented reader process of clicking on sections and subsections in an individual pathway through a CD ROM the reader can discovered hitherto undiscovered texts, ones which exist parallel or in proximity to another known text. This new and ephemeral text (no other reader will necessarily take that exact path and the reader is unlikely to repeat that exact pathway) is elevated to the level of authored text. Consequentially the hypertext writer is one of a team of writers and readers. The writer is not responsible for the development of the narrative. His or her task is simply to provide a range of items that a reader/author might combine in different ways to construct their own ephemeral narrative.

'Dispersal,' 'fragmentation' and 'handing over the narrative' became phrases the writing students had to grapple with. The student most adept at traditional writing, Peter, had this to say about the process of authoring hypertext:

I found the entire concept of trying to script a CD ROM to be exceedingly frustrating... Prior to this project, my writing tended to focus on the areas of play scripting, prose writing and poetry. All three forms of writing have at least one thing in common, each has a set beginning, middle and end. The audience can only progress through the piece in one direction, and that is the direction that the author chooses to lead them. All the narratives are built around the writer's knowledge of what the audience has and hasn't been told so far... With scripting ...CD ROMs... the luxury of knowing what the audience does and doesn't know is taken from the writer. Instead, the structure is based around the audience being able to direct themselves and explore each screen in an order of their own choosing. The primary basis for the script is the flowchart... visualising a CD ROM script is like visualising a giant spider web.

In another part of his paper, he goes on to say:

Apart from the problems with structure, I also had problems adapting to thinking in terms of imagery. There is really very little that needs to be scripted in the traditional sense in Artyfact. Instead, most of the scripting needs were based around needing to develop icons, backgrounds ideas, directions for the pages to take and other conceptual things. In short, the entire process seems to require people who are capable of thinking visually, who can see clear pictures in their heads and quickly convey a sense of those pictures to other people.

He recognised the radically different nature of writing hypertext, and perhaps wanting to stay within the confines of his solitary author role, or perhaps avoiding 'dispersal' he rejected this form of writing - not as a form of writing *per se*, but as one he wanted to engage with.

Writing for most of us is a singular and somewhat solitary activity. There are times in our process when we work collaboratively or with another individual in the dramaturgy or editorial process, but these are few in hours when compared with the solitary aspect of most of the task. While much sympathy is given to contemporary theoretical

positions relating to the reader/author, most writers spend hours of their lives trying to perfect the clarity of their narrative and thus direct as much as possible any reading of it. Those of us engaged in the theoretical debate find ourselves, at times, in a divided space where our practice and our theory not so much split but decline to engage in anything more than a casual conversation. However, writers of hypertext engage with the reader/author position eagerly. Possibly in few other situations has the contemporary theory of the reader/author been so totally embraced by writers as in hypertext.

New Collaboration

It is argued that such a new notion of author - the dispersed, fragmented, non-directive author - requires a new working process, a new form of collaboration. The problem here is that the new collaborative process, if it exists, is unmapped and generating this collaboration is not without its own difficulties. As seen above, Peter rejected the idea of a collaborative author. Kelli, who came from the visual art tradition, also struggled with this collaborative concept but was more successful at adjusting. She writes:

Two of the largest things I got from my time within the group, is learning that although an idea is mine, it will not always be acknowledged that way... the other... is a variant on the first, when one of your ideas is claimed by another as their own. This was a situation I had to deal with during the project and I found it to be one of the most hurtful and confusing times I'd had to face, where the question of 'why?' could only be responded to with the statement 'human nature'.

Luke also, at least in part, rejected the collaborative nature of the project. He found a way of working which isolated his contribution and he generated this need for individual, clearly-defined roles onto the entire group dynamics. He writes:

Even at our earliest meetings members of the production group were allotting themselves, or finding themselves allotted, certain roles...I found myself in the design team... and one of the major concerns as part of the design team, was the interface screen.

He later also comments:

After weeks of being in crowded rooms, not knowing exactly what it was I was supposed to be producing, or how to produce it, it was good to be on my own, with a specific goal, and a specific way to produce it.

Perhaps one of the few members who came to grips with the collaborative nature of the work was Michael whose experience was in film, a more collaborative industry. He was less troubled by ownership and artistic integrity, something that haunted Peter and Luke and made life, at least initially, difficult for Kelli. Michael talks about this by coupling the role of artistic expression with technical know-how.

There was no doubt that technical expertise was needed in most areas, but the project was not technical, it was human. To get technical brilliance something is needed which cannot be technically solved, a human touch... It is when technical and creative powers meet, results that are remembered, are made.

Later he also writes: 'It's technology that rocks the cradle.'

Hager (1993:103) speaks of a plurality in both text and authorship and Landow (1992a:115) utilises Claude Lévi-Strauss' notion of *bricolage* (the construction of something out of whatever materials are available) and claims that the reader-author and (I would add) maker of hypertext is foremost a *bricoleur*.

So confronting was this concept for the individual artists that Josh, an Indian student who later was referred to as The Pixel Prince, said in his journal:

At this point I begin to wonder if I actually made a CD ROM or took a course in personal development. But as I see it these lessons learnt were just as important as learning the technical aspects of creating the CD ROM.

What I have been at pains to point out in this paper is that the nature of hypertext and consequentially the making of a CD ROM generates an awkwardness in those who come to it thinking that they can maintain their artistic individuality. If artistic integrity is expressed in those terms then the making of hypertext will be seen as a painful one, rejected and almost feared.

Snyder (1996:97) talks of a need to create a new space and points out that to generate hypertext the nature of a narrative needs to be extended to embrace the reader/author and that the combined writer and reader need to work together to forge a space where this form of writing can exist. But where can we find that space and how totally do we need to embrace fragmentation in order to find it?

Moulthrop (1991b:295) goes further and rejects overt signposts and navigational aids often found in hypertext. He finds these restrict the narrative or direction of the hypertext. Instead, for Moulthrop, this new writing thrives on the tension generated between the cornucopia and the ordered menu, between the predictable and the unexpected. Even a certain disorientation can only help to excite and simulate the reader's interest.

New or Old Methods?

But I wonder if the fragmentary nature of hypertext is so very new to us. Moulthrop (1991a:66) usefully points out that the history of the technology of writing, from marks in clay and on stone tables to electronic hypertext is not a history of takeover bids and radical transformation. One technology has given way to the next in a reasonably ordered progression. Furthermore, old and newer technologies exist side by side. For example, while I use throw-away ball point pens for a good deal of my writing, I still have and use a fountain pen which I regularly and carefully fill from my bottle of ink. I enjoy the old technology. Interestingly the older technology has become something of a status symbol or a luxury item. Fountain pens are expensive and mine has become part of my personal expression or jewellery, if you like - I relate to it in much the same way as I do my glasses or my watch.

I walked into a colleague's office. Reg is known to us all as a bit of a computer illiterate. He was at the time writing a paper and spread over his desk were a series of books, all opened at special places. There were cards and bits of paper, and a further unopened pile of books on the floor next to his chair. Reg's system of note-taking, annotation and the subsequent writing of his paper seemed to employ much of the process of hypertext. He moves fluidly between notes and books and cards, fluidly between ideas, connecting them in new and exciting ways. He had on the floor a store of further ideas, further places to visit if he felt the need or desire to do so.

Would we call his paper writing system a form of hypertext? Would we then dispute his authorship or insist on some new collaborative technique?

Further, when we examine the structure of hypertext, what is revealed is a series of sections or something we might call chapters. There is inevitably an opening 'contents' page, renamed as 'the interface' and then discrete areas of the product - in the case of *Artyfact* these were called 'worlds'. I wonder at the need to invent the new terms. What would happen to our thinking if we labeled the parts of hypertext 'chapters', 'contents page' and the like?

While much of the discussion about the uniqueness of hypertext has placed it in opposition to the constructed ordered and bound book, I wonder if we are not really constructing in hypertext something more akin to a magazine or an anthology? In the magazine a reader flicks over the contents page and then dips into the various articles, notes, pictures, reviews or whatever. I can't recall when I last read a magazine from cover to cover, or when I went about looking at it in a linear fashion. Is my reading of the magazine unique? Am I constructing my own ephemeral narrative?

Perhaps if we use the language of magazines or anthologies to discuss the structure of a hypertext product we might experience less confusion or disorientation when faced with working in hypertext. We would have, at least initially, a way of thinking about this new technology and a way of generating familiar collaborative processes. I am not suggesting here that hypertext writing will not generate its own discourse, what I am saying is that it is a discourse which *emerges* and lives as a neighbour to more familiar discourses regarding our writing and reading processes.

REFERENCES

- Berk, E. and J. Devlin (1991) (eds) *Hypertext/Hypermedia Handbook*, New York: Intertext Publications McGraw-Hill
- Borges, J. L. (1970) *Labyrinths*, D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby (eds) Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books
- Borges, J. L. (1970) 'The Garden of Forking Paths' in *Labyrinths*, pp.44-54
- Hager, T. (1993) "A Rhetoric of Hypertextual Invention." *Writing on the Edge* 4, 2, pp. 103-15 Return to article.
- Johnson-Eilola, J. (1992) "A Feeling for Prose: Interstitial Links and the Contours of Hypertext", *Writing on the Edge* 4, 1, pp. 83-101
- Kelly, K. (1994) *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines*, London, Fourth Estate Return to article.
- Landow, G. P. (1992) *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press Return to article.
- Lanham, R. A. (1993) *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology and the Arts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Moulthrop, S. (1991a) "Toward a Paradigm for Reading Hypertexts: Making Nothing Happen in Hypermedia Fiction" in Berk and Devlin (eds) *Hypertext/Hypermedia Handbook* pp. 65-78 Return to article.

Moulthrop, S. (1991b) 'Polymers, Paranoia, and the Rhetoric of Hypertext', *Writing on the Edge* 2, 2, pp.150-9
Return to article.

Moulthrop, S. (1992) 'Informant and Rhetoric: A Hypertextual Experiment', *Writing on the Edge* 4, 1, pp 103-27

Snyder, I. (1996) *Hypertext: The Electronic Labyrinth*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press Return to article.

Tranter, John, *Jacket* <http://www.jacket.zip.com.au>

Woolley, B. (1992) *Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyper-reality*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin
Books Return to article.

Zervos, Komninos (1997) "Technoliteratures and the Internet" *TEXT* Vol 1 No 2 October

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/index.htm>

Unpublished third year student exegesis from Kelli Greary, Luke Shepherd, Michael Ericssen, Ben James, Peter Ball,
Josh Gojer, and Nadine Clarke.

TEXT

Vol 3 No 2 October 1999

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au