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2000-03-25

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17349>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Simanowski, Roberto: and/and/and - reading and thinking hypertext: an interview with J. Yellowlees Douglas. In: *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*. Nr. 10, Jg. 2 (2000-03-25), Nr. 3, S. 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17349>.

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and/and/and - reading and thinking hypertext: an interview with J. Yellowlees Dougles

By Roberto Simanowski

No. 10 – 25.03.2000

Abstract

J. Yellowlees Dougles, Director of the William and Grace Dial Center for Written and Oral Communication and Assistant Professor of English at the University of Florida, has been researching and writing on social construction of digital technologies and on hypertext focusing on the applicability of literary theory, narratology and aesthetics to hypertext environments. In her essay "How do I stop this thing" (1994) she discusses the effect of hypertext's displacement of closure on the act of reading with special regard to Michael Joyce's "Afternoon".

Her recent book "End of Books or Books without End" (2000) - "A classic of hypertext theory and criticism" (Jay David Bolter) - examines how interactive fiction works, takes a careful look at the state of hypertext criticism today, and suggests how the future development of interactive narratives relate to the New Realism. (see extended abstract, order from  [Eastgate Systems](#)). Roberto Simanowski talked with her about satisfactions and limitations of hypertext, about its three paradoxes, and about her hyperfiction "I Have Said Nothing".

dd: Jane, you are the director of the "Center for Written and Oral Communication" at the University of Florida and you are teaching a course "Advanced Expository Writing", where students learn what makes writing clear and concise and what makes it confusing. You also have published essays about writing and reading hypertext where the titles refer to confusion, such as "Is There a Reader in this Labyrinth?" (1992) or "How Do I Stop This Thing? Closure and Indeterminacy in Interactive Narratives" (1994). How do traditional and electronic writing fit together?

YD: The main precepts that give traditional forms of writing their power and eloquence essentially hold true for electronic writing. The basis of both, after all, is still the language, and English has some interesting and unique pratfalls because

it's a hybrid of a Germanic language with a French/Latinate overlay, so you'd naturally address details like that regardless of the environment you're working in. And you really should know intimately how the written word works in a print environment to understand ways of playing advantageously off features of electronic environments. It's a bit like needing to understand speech and the differences between speech and writing to write well. In some ways, electronic writing can have aims antithetical to print, but you really need to understand both environments to address those instances.

dd: In your well-known essay "How Do I Stop This Thing?" you discuss that hypertext cheats the reader out of a happy ending. This does not refer to the Hollywood-style happy ending, but the happiness which comes from any ending as a confirmation or negation of our assumptions, as a release of tension. In hypertext there is sometimes no definite end. You quote the famous node "Work in progress" from Michael Joyce's hyperfiction "Afternoon": "Closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends." In the light of this, the end of a hyperfiction is not the result of closure and release but of exhaustion. Your new book alludes to the closing issue in the title: "The End of Books? Or Books Without End? Reading Hypertext Narratives." How shall we read hypertext narratives? How can we enjoy them?

YD: Since computers are above all plastic, I'm reminded of Joyce's "There is no simple way to say this," line in *Afternoon*. Sometimes hypertext means physical closure—but not closure itself—is suspended indefinitely; sometimes, closure is strictly reader-determined and, sometimes, it's author-determined; and some narratives have a surfeit of closure. In Shannon Gilligan's "Virtual Murder" series of interactive CD-ROMs, readers are treated to not one ending to the traditional detective story but three, mutually exclusive, satisfying endings.

With hypertext, even that most obsolescent of literary genres, the mystery, has a much longer shelf-life than it does in print. When you find out "whodunit" in a print mystery, you seldom want to pick up the book and revisit its plot, since the ending removes the need to reread it and few mystery stories are sufficiently well written or populated with enough memorable characters to make us want to reread them. But an interactive mystery's possibilities and outcomes aren't exhausted after you "solve" the murder for the first time: the next two times you "solve" the case will be completely different and will unfold differently.

So, like print, hypertext isn't a monolithic thing: in print fiction, you have Stephen King and you have James Joyce—two dramatically different writers with entirely different audiences of readers seeking totally different kinds of experiences from reading their work. And with hypertext, you have writers like Michael Joyce who eschew conventional closure and neatly bound resolutions and writers like Jordan Mechner

with a few dozen resolutions to a narrative that seems half a thirties film noir and half a Rebecca West novel. One of the most satisfying resolutions to Mechner's Last Express occurs half-way on the main character's journey to Istanbul: he gets off the train in Vienna with a cache of money and escapes a score of trials that had been lying in wait. Some days, you want to take the money and take a breather from the adventure mode. Some days, you want to tackle things using the boldest and most heroic means possible.

Hypertext has the virtue of being able to give us all the satisfactions that print gives us with very few of its limitations. But, like any medium, hypertext has its limitations: you can't interact with a text on zombie, auto-pilot mode--this isn't something you want to tackle after you've been thoroughly trounced in the office. And interactive texts take a hell of a lot longer to enjoy, work with, explore, and resolve than convention texts do. Sometimes, you want to zone out, watch TV, and think as little as possible. Sometimes, you'd rather read than watch television; sometimes, you'd far rather see a film than read a novel; sometimes, you want to read something interactive.

dd: That means, hyperfiction, book and television can peacefully coexist?

We're talking about niches here--the theatre is still going strong after a couple of millennia, as well as the onslaughts of novel-reading, Hollywood, and television, so all this fuss about hypertext replacing print is idiotic. The only examples we currently have of killer technologies--those that wiped out the forms that preceded them--are the automobile and electric light. Everything else is about proliferating niches. As I said in an essay on reading and hypertext, we ought to be thinking in terms of and/and/or, NOT either/or.

dd: One of your essays is entitled "The Three Paradoxes of Hypertext: How Theories of Textuality Shape Interface Design" (1996). What are the other two paradoxes?

YD: The three paradoxes that seemed to be thrown up by different writers on hypertext were:

1. Is hypertext "born" or "made"?
Is the primary capacity of hypertext a singular thing, unchanged across environments and cultures, with certain fundamental properties that distinguish the technology and transcend the interests and intents of its users? Or is hypertext an evolving technology that exists in a variety of forms that are shaped by its designers, users, and researchers who adapt its capabilities to suit their disparate needs?
2. Can technical capacity determine or limit utility?
Is hypertext a new tool that comes to us free of any already existing conventions? Or is hypertext a relatively new tool with a built-in agenda that limits the types of activities it can support?

3. Does hypertext make readers into sovereigns or slaves?

Does hypertext provide its readers with far greater autonomy in their use of words than readers currently enjoy with print? Or does hypertext provide writers with tools for greater control over the way in which readers use their texts than authors currently enjoy in print?

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dd: You not only research electronic narratives, but you also have written a hyperfiction yourself. This piece has the symbolic title "I Have Said Nothing". It describes a car accident and tries to come to terms with death and the loss of a very close person. In one node ("You sit, you think") you write: "You sit and think for a while, maybe forty-five minutes solid, about the ugliness of your primary urge—which is to write all of this down." Another node ("What?") says: "For a long time afterwards, whenever you two don't quite meet up on the phone, he can't seem to get the narrative order of events quite right. He keeps shuffling it around, until you realize neither of you know what it was anymore." Finally, a third node recalls St. Augustine: "if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say." Is the chosen hypertext structure the most appropriate to do the doubtful, to describe the incomprehensible?

YD: I'd tried writing this story for a long time—ten years—and it simply didn't work as a print story. I wanted to talk about the way you can't really say anything that touches on death, and I wanted to explore all the scenarios that could emerge from one character, Luke, struggling with his girlfriend's death, as well as all the scenarios that might occur at the moment when his girlfriend dies. It never worked as a print story: it's too perverse for print, using thousands of words to arrive at the conclusion that you can't say anything about death and, moreover, that everything you've just said is not only contingent on all sorts of circumstances but is also deeply suspect, perhaps null.

Then someone I knew asked if I would write a piece of interactive fiction for a project she was putting together, and I did a light, humorous piece that worked well. I felt a bit guilty that writing it had been so easy and that the interactive story was going to work really well in terms of the spec for the project, so I sat down to grapple with this darker piece of fiction that had been evading me for over a decade. And I stopped struggling against what novelist Robert Coover has called "the line" of print. Hypertext just seemed like the most congenial environment for it, since the story had a whole raft of endings that were fairly definitive: three characters die in endings. And it also had endings that weren't endings, more like resting places. And endings that undid other endings. It was a story I could never have told in print.

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dd: In the same hyperfiction, the node "Random sweepings" displays a quote of Heraclitus: "The fairest order in the world is a heap of random sweepings." That's a strong claim which seems to be confirmed by your essay "Abandoning the Either/Or for the And/And/And: Hypertext and the Art of Argumentative Writing" (1996). To what extent is it true? Is hypertext the appropriate form of thinking and ordering the world?

YD: The Heraclitus quote seemed appropriate to the narrator's trying to understand the deaths in "I Have Said Nothing," but I wouldn't say that necessarily about argumentation generally. I'm a relativist, however, so I find print frustrating because print evolved during an era when the Church used the written word to enlarge and maintain its power in the West. So one way of looking at the singularity of print, its linearity and fixity, is as a response to just how far-flung the Church's territory was during the medieval era. Print evolved as a means of extending the range of one's voice, opinions, and control beyond the range of either voice or physical control. You WANT fixity and linearity from a medium that evolved to do that task.

But we live in a far more complex world than the one either Plato or Gutenberg inhabited. Thomas Kuhn's work on dominant paradigms in science, for example, makes perfect sense if you're describing the shift from Newtonian physics to quantum physics or from the Ptolemaic view of astronomy to the Copernican view or from the Lamarckian view of geology and evolution to the Darwinian. But Kuhn's theory doesn't satisfactorily account for shifts in biology or medicine.

The accuracy and utility of most knowledge depends an awful lot on where you happen to be standing when you ask questions. And you can't very successfully buck a thousand years of convention that governed the written word in representing relativism in print—editors and other readers will just think you're dicing with bad rhetoric. Or you end up writing like an objectivist to come up with something that sounds like a conclusion, which every piece of print is supposed to have. So you might end up like sociologist Steve Woolgar, a very inventive reflexive relativist, by saying that the work you're critiquing is insufficiently relativistic.

But you have to face the irony that your ultimate position, in saying that, has just become objectivist. And I find it ironic that, with Western culture really tilting toward relativism, we're still stuck with the ultimate objectivist medium, print. David Kolb, who's written a terrific hypertext work, "Socrates in the Labyrinth" has some really eye-opening insights about what hypertext has to offer argument and philosophy alike.

dd: What is your next research project?

YD: I'm working on a book about the way that so much thinking about technology in the humanities and education assumes that technology's effects are totally determined by technical capacity—thinking that's descending from writings by

people like Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong who assume that technologies have timeless, changeless, immutable features that dictate how it can be used.

That's a really simple, mechanical model of causation that just isn't borne out by the history of how other technologies have developed—or even how orality and literacy function in societies that aren't part of the Western mainstream. The biggest irony I note in "Strange Bedfellows: Luddites, Technophiles, and the Myth of Endless Progress" is that the technophiles and the rabid Luddites share the same theories about how technologies supposedly work—and those theories are pretty narrowly informed and may ultimately prove dangerous if they continue to inform how and why we use technology in education and our daily lives.

dd: I look forward to learn more about this objection to the media-is-the-message position. For now thank you very much for the interview.