Digital Literature: From Text to Hypertext and Beyond

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Abstract of Raine Koskimaa's PhD thesis*.*

In this study, I have chosen "hypertext" as the central concept. If we define hypertext as interconnected bits of language (I am stretching Ted Nelson's original definition quite a lot, but still maintaining its spirit, I believe) we can understand why Nelson sees hypertext "as the most general form of writing". There is no inherent connotation to digital in hypertext (the first hypertext system was based on microfilms), but it is the computerized, digital framework - allowing the easy manipulation of both texts and their connections - which gives the most out of it. In addition to the "simple" hypertexts, there is a whole range of digital texts much more complex and more "clever", which cannot be reduced to hypertext, even though they too are based on hypertextuality. Such digital texts as MUDs (Multi User Domains - text based virtual realities) are clearly hypertextual - there are pieces of text describing different environments usually called "rooms" and the user may wander from room to room as in any hypertext. At the same time, however, there are several other functions available for the user, she may talk with other users, write her own rooms, program objects performing special tasks, or, solve problems and collect game points.

Hypertextuality and hypertext theory do not help us much (if at all) in understanding this kind of textual functionality. For that we need *cybertext theory*. Cybertextuality is - as Espen Aarseth has defined it - *a perspective on all texts*, a perspective which takes into account and foregrounds the functionality of all texts. *From the cybertextual point of view all texts are machines which perform certain functions and which have to be used in a certain way*. Also, the reader may be required to perform some functions in order to be able to read the texts, or, she may be allowed to act as an active participant inside the textual world.

Cybertextuality, then, is not only about digital texts, but because digital form allows much more freedom to textual functionality, there is much more need for cybertext theory in the field of digital texts than in print text.[1] So, keeping in mind cybertextuality is a perspective on all texts, we can use the term cybertext in a more limited sense to refer to functional digital texts - this means that all digital texts are

not necessary cybertexts (plain text files like in the *Project Gutenberg* archives, or, e-texts in pdf format are no more functional than average print texts).

Now we can better define the scope of this study. The theoretical framework is a combination of cybertext theory and more traditional theory of literature. The focus is on hypertext fiction, even though several other text types - digital and non-digital, literary and non literary, fiction and poetry - are also discussed. To deepen the understanding of hypertext fiction and its reading, quite of lot of attention is paid to the evolutionary line of print fiction which seems to be a major influence in the background. That aspect explains the first part of the subtitle, "From text to hypertext", with an emphasis on the transitory phase we are witnessing. On the other hand, the approach is open to the latent aspects of the hypertexts discussed, which already refer to the wider cybertextual properties - because of that the "and Beyond". In the main title, "Digital Literature", literature is used in a narrow ("literary") sense. The method is inductive in that through scrutinizing individual, concrete exmples, a more general understanding of the field is sought after. Through not trying to include all the possible digital text types in this study I aim to be more analytic than descriptive.

This work should be seen as a collection of independent papers - some of them are previously published, some are still waiting for a proper forum. Most of them have started as seminar papers. I have used the opportunity to make some corrections and changes to the articles previously published (mainly to reduce redundancy, or, to add materials cut out from the publications) - thus, the chapters of this study are not identical with published versions.

In the **first chapter** of this study I will give a description of the various traditions behind digital literature, of characteristic properties of digital literature, and, the basics of cybertext theory. I consider various hypertext studies belonging as a part to the broader category of cybertext theory.

The **second chapter**, "Hyperhistory, Cybertheory: From Memex to ergodic literature", is an overview of cybertext theory, circling around Aarseth's theory of cybertext and ergodic literature. Various other approaches are discussed, and integrated to the theoretical framework. For understanding cybertext theory, a historical glance to the development of hypertext systems (and ideologies behind them) is necessary. The integration of hyper- and cybertheories is still very much in progress - hopefully this chapter contributes to that integration.

In the **third chapter** "Replacement and Displacement. At the limits of print fiction", several novels and stories are scrutinized from the cybertextual perspective. The aim of the chapter is to show the various ways in which print fiction has anticipated hypertextual practices.

The **fourth chapter**, "Ontolepsis: from violation to central device" focusses on the narrative device which I have dubbed *ontolepsis*. Ontolepsis covers different kinds of "leaks" between separate ontological levels (inside fictional universe). *Metalepsis*, the crossing of levels of embedded narration, is one type of ontolepses, and certainly so far the most studied one. There is a rather lengthy discussion of fictional ontology, and its relation to narrative levels, because these are essential topics in understanding the phenomenon of ontolepsis in all its forms. A science fiction novel, Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*, is used as an example, because its multilayered ontology serves perfectly in illustrating the multifarious nature of ontolepsis. In fiction, ontolepses have been seen as violations of certain conventions - the latter part of the chapter discusses how in hypertext fiction ontolepsis has become a central narrative device.

In the **fifth chapter**, "Visual structuring of hypertext narratives", three hypertexts, Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*, Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, are analyzed stressing their navigation interfaces and use of "spatial signification". Narratological questions are also foregrounded.

Chapters six and seven, "Reading *Victory Garden* - Competing Interpretations and Loose Ends" and "In Search of Califia" form a pair. They are rather lengthy analyses, or, interpretations, of Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, and M. D. Coverley's *Califia*. In the end of *Califia* chapter, the question of interpreting hypertexts is discussed. Two forms of interpretative practice, hermeneutics and poetics, seem to have their own roles in regard to hypertexts.

The **next chapter**, "Negotiating new reading conventions" focusses on reading. In this chapter I'll look at how traditional reading conventions, on the one hand, still inform hypertext reading, and on the other hand, how hypertexts themselves teach new reading habits, and how new reading formations are negotiated.

The **final chapter**, "Hypertext Fiction in the Twilight Zone" is a kind of summary. It suggest that fiction based on "pure" hypertext may be closing its end, and at the same time, looks at the cybertextual means which have appeared to fertilize the field anew. In the horizon there are computer games, virtual realities and other massively programmed forms towering, but also a possibility for a new literature.

Notes

1. Which is not to say that there were no use for cybertext theory in the field of print texts - first, there is an amount of experimental or avant garde print texts

which take full advantage of functionality potential print book offers; and secondly, there is still much to do to understand the way how literature (even in the most traditional form) works *as a technology* (see Sukenick (1972) "The New Tradition", in: *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press) - cybertext theory should prove quite fruitful in that field of study.