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Hypertext, Cybertext, Digital Literature, Medium: an interview with Espen Aarseth

By Roberto Simanowski

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Abstract

Espen Aarseth is Associate Professor, Dept. of Humanistic Informatics, Univ. of Bergen since 1996. His research interests are Aesthetics of Cybermedia, Ergodic Literature, Hypertext, MUDs, Computer Culture Studies, and History of media technology. He has widely published on these topics and is well known as the author of "Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature", one of the most thoughtful and challenging publications in the field. Roberto Simanowski talked with Espen Aarseth about hypertext research and curricula in Norway, about classifications and categorisations, MUDs, the new umbrella term medium, and the distinction between art and commerce.

dd: Espen, you were teaching "Hypermedia og Nettverkskommunikasjon" (hypertext of network communication). What exactly is this course about?

EA: That was an old 60course, which I don't really remember that well anymore. Just a web ghost now, I suppose. I am not teaching much this year or next; this year I am working on an open source digital learning environment using MOO, and next year I am commissioned to write a book on digital power and culture for the Norwegian Power Structures Survey, as a small part of a big four year research project funded by Norwegian government.

dd: You are the head of "cyber/media/culture", a multidisciplinary project in your department, that aims to provide an environment for cooperation and growth, gathering researchers and practitioners in the broad field of humanistic cyberstudies. Could you tell us a little about your experiences with this project and about the role this topic plays in the academic field in Norway?

EA: As in all other countries, this is a new field, and there is no fixed way of teaching and research yet. A lot is going on in many different places, but largely

uncoordinated and mostly small-scale. This is changing now, witness for instance the "Nordic Interactive" initiative (<http://www.nordic-interactive.org>), an attempt to bring "Scandinavian design" to digital media. In my department, we are, as of January 2000, five (out of six) researchers working in various subfields of digital culture. 15 months ago, there was just me.

Obviously, the field is expanding rapidly, and takes different paths depending on the interests of the people involved. In Bergen, I hope we will be able to combine critical and exploratory perspectives, doing both criticism and design; programing and cultural/aesthetic theory, and training the same students in both. The C/M/C-project is an umbrella for all our practical and theoretical projects, and has so far been funded nicely by the Norwegian Research Council, among others, which has made the DAC-conferences possible.

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dd: The title of your book "Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature" already shows that you are very critical regarding common terms, as well as common assumptions like 'freedom of the reader' and 'death of the author'. How does the term Cybertext differ from more traditional terms such as Hypertext, and what does Ergodic Literature mean?

EA: In constructing the term Cybertext, I wanted to show that there are many forms and machinations of text, of which hypertext (in the node-link sense) is just one. Hypertext was at that time (early 90s) getting all the attention, and I wanted to change that, by constructing a larger perspective. But both "hypertext" and "cybertext" are, it seems to me, ideological constructs rather than actual technologies.

The term Ergodic, on the other hand, is an attempt to define the quality that is so inappropriately usually referred to by "interactive"; a hopelessly unfocussed and ill-conceived term, completely void of analytic meaning. I needed a word for texts that was structured in more complex ways than standard, sequential, written discourse, and "ergodic", meaning a path constructed by some kind of work, fit the bill.

dd: You are calling "hypertext" and "cybertext" ideological constructs. Does this mean, one should stay away from any umbrella-term and typologies? What are the "actual" technologies?

EA: Classifications and categorisations, if constructed carefully, can only be useful. Words like that will always have ideological connotations, but as long as they are part of a well-defined theoretical framework, the risk is acceptable. We must of course never confuse the theoretical concept, say hypertext, with the numerous material "incarnations", from Hypercard to XML, to name a few. Few researchers define "hypertext" in the same way, however, which indicates that hypertext is not a

technology, but rather a dream of a technology. In other words, a (scientific) ideology.

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dd: In your article "Nonlinearity" in "Hyper/Text/Theory", edited by Geprg P. Landow (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. S. 78) you write: "a MUD can not be read, only experienced". How does the MUD as adventure game or immersive storytelling fit into the field of digital literature?

EA: Only by its eventual contributions to literary language. The players in a MUD generally do not regard what they do as literature, so why should we? Btw, the phrase "immersive storytelling" is meaningless to me; all storytelling is immersive, unless it is really bad storytelling. (It reminds me of that really stupid term "interactive games".)

dd: Well, the term "immersive storytelling" might be misunderstood. It is meant to stress the different ways in which stories are received. While the audience was much more involved with reading books and seeing plays in the 18th century (sometimes theater directors were even forced not to let Hamlet die) the viewers in theaters have learned to keep themselves controlled, the readers have learned to see what is happening at a distance. However in the present time, MUDs immerse the reader directly into the story, because it is their own story.

EA: What goes on in MUDs is not storytelling, but something else. It may contain elements that are also associated with storytelling, but so does, say, taking a dog for a walk, or talking to your neighbour. To comment on the quote from my book, a MUD is an ephemeral phenomenon, with innumerable, mutually exclusive perspectives, and no one can have a total view of it all. And even if everything was recorded, the reading of such a recording will not reproduce the MUD, it will only be some kind of museum.

On the other hand, there are MUDs (especially MOOs) that are being used for selfconscious literary experiments, and I think that as far as "Literature" is concerned, these experiments are much more easily fitted in the "Literary paradigm" than adventure games. Which is not to say that they are necessarily more interesting in themselves.

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dd: In the same article you ask: "How can reviewers of cybertext face the fact they probably missed large numbers of scriptons?" You suggest "a shift in method from a philological to an anthropological approach in which the object of study is a process (the changing text) rather than a project (the static text)." What exactly would this shift involve?

EA: We are just starting to find out. How do you review a multiuser computer game such as Quake III Arena? By rating your opponents? A good player will have a very different experience from that of a poor player. Perhaps the best way to find out is by looking at actual computer game reviews and how that genre is different from other types of reviews. Perhaps the difference is not that great, in which case my initial concern was completely unnecessary.

dd: Do you know of any reviews that might serve as examples of how one should approach cybertext?

EA: It depends on the context. There is a big but natural difference between the reviews you find at places like Firingsquad.com and say, a scholarly paper discussing the same types of games. Both have their uses. But to answer your question, my notion of cybertext is so broad that there is no one ideal way.

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dd: In your book "Cybertext," in the chapter "Textonomy: A Typology of Textual Communication" you stress that, "Since there are paper texts that function more like some digital texts than other texts in the same physical medium, the paper-digital dichotomy cannot be given analytical power as such ..." (59) This is clear with respect to hypertextual printed texts such as *I Ching* (ca. 1000 B.C.), Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1962) or Randi Strand's *Norisbo* (1992). Therefore your conclusion about the inappropriateness of the paper-electronic dichotomy is quite understandable. But there are other digital texts that may not be found on paper and will never be found there: texts which include sound and animated pictures, texts which immediately respond to an interactive, collaborative set up. In the light of this, couldn't one still employ the term digital as distinctive and thus defining?

EA: I often do so myself. "Digital" is a much more honest word than say, "interactive," or even "cybertext". As long as we are clear that it only means something that is, in some way, computer-mediated. Being digital does not signify much in itself; there are so many digital ways of being, that by itself it tells us very little. That there are radical digital works means that some works are more radical than others, not that they are more digital than others.

And the example you mentioned: "texts which include sound and animated pictures", those are far from impossible on paper! My daughter has several such books, with figures that move when you open the page, and buttons that make sounds when pressed. It doesn't have to be digital, but the ideology of information technology makes us see it that way. Or, should I say, makes us blind that way.

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dd: What will the Cybertext of the next millenium be like? Given the growing 'multimedialisation' of the net, will we need another term besides text?

EA: We have one: Medium. The natural corollary to cybertext is cybermedium/-media. As for what the next millenium will bring, I am not too eager to speculate. The future is not nearly as interesting as the present. Not to mention the past.

dd: "Medium" might be the best term in deed. There is only one problem: it does not distinguish between fictional and nonfictional text, not between art and commerce just as "digital" does not. Do we need a distinction like this at all, or will, for example, Flash-Aesthetics flatten commercial and artistic websites anyway?

EA: Personally, I find the distinction between art and commerce to be a completely commercial one. Artists need it to sell their art as art. There may be a good philosophical argument for such a distinction, using aesthetic considerations only, but I have yet to find it. The best counter-example these days is commercials in TV series, which are often more enjoyable than the series themselves. Of course, I also find the distinction between fiction and non-fiction rather fictional. But these are not really distinctions, merely cultural prejudices.

Finally, the last part of your question seems to invoke that old McLuhan clichée, but I believe that the media serve the messages, rather than dominate them completely. We choose the media that serve us.

dd: Thank you very much for the interview and good luck for your work on cybertext and cybermedia.