Reading *Victory Garden*

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Abstract

Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1991) is one of the "classical hyperfictions" alongside Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* (1987) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1993). Of these three, however, *Victory Garden* has been all but neglected by the critics - in its truly novelistic size (993 lexias), multifarious navigating possibilities, innovative hypertextual devices, as well as intertextually dense frame of references it is well worth closer attention.

The essay starts with an overview of the work, describing both the technical aspects (like the reader interface) and the main story lines and characters. Then, the hypertextual structure of *Victory Garden* is discussed, with particular emphasis on Moulthrop's use of the device we call "singular loop" (as opposed to an indefinite loop). In singular loop the reader is taken back to a previous point in the path she is reading, but the next time around not. There is a loop, a sequence of lexias read twice, but after that the path continues forward. One possible motivation for this kind of structure is to invoke a certain sense of malfunctioning, of an unintentional lapse in the running of the narration. Also, the questions of repetition and repetition with difference are discussed, trying to demonstrate the difference between hypertextual and narrative structures.

Next, we try to identify alternative "framestories", which would motivate the hypertextual structures employed in Victory Garden. There are at least four of those: the Borgesian forking paths idea (which is closely linked to possible worlds semantics), the dream-as-hypertext, the virtual reality simulation, and, conspiracy paranoia. Further on, we will next turn to the intertextual references and allusions in *Victory Garden*, which back up these different interpretational frames. Three essential subtexts are Jorge Luis Borges' stories (especially "Garden of Forking Paths" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), William Burrough's stories employing the cut up technique, and, Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*.

In this essay we offer several competing interpretations of Moulthrop's work, but even all of them together cannot explain each and every aspect of the large web of *Victory Garden*. But, as we argue, trying to interpret Victory Garden means mainly to try and describe how the mechanism works; in other words, trying to explain the poetics of the text.

Competing Interpretations and Loose Ends

Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1991) is one of the "classical hyperfictions" alongside Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* (1987) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1993). Of these three, however, Victory Garden has been all but neglected by the critics - while especially Afternoon has been the subject of dozens of detailed analyses, *Victory Garden* has been mainly shortly referred to, receiving mentions as a rather traditional, typical academic novel etc. There are, however, several reasons to pay closer attention to this *tour de force* of one of the most innovative and prolific hyperfiction authors so far, as I shall be trying to show in this article.

Moulthrop's digital oeuvre is wide ranging. He first started with an adaptation of Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" (which included a mass of original text in addition to Borges' source story) using software he had programmed himself for this purpose. He later transferred the text into the brand new *Story Space* hypertext environment - the work and its reception by a group of students is described in Moulthrop's influential essay "Reading from the Map: Metonymy and Metaphor and the Fiction of Forking Paths" (Moulthrop1991). *Victory Garden* was published in 1991. After that he has done mainly Web-based works, including *The Colour of Television* (1996; with Sean Cohen), *Hegirascope* (1995/1997), and *Reagan Library* (1999). *Hegirascope* effectively uses push technology to produce a stream of narrative fragments starting with the highly charged "What if the word would not be still?" header. *Reagan Library* uses Quick Time VR plug-in to add a three-dimensional panorama illustration to the hypertext - the work can be navigated both through the panorama or through the text links. *Reagan Library* also uses random operators in selecting the text materials - repeated visits to particular locations add information to them, thus "reducing noise" and giving more coherent picture of the text.

One obvious difference between *Victory Garden* and *Afternoon* or *Patchwork Girl* is size: *Victory Garden* includes 993 lexias, and more than 2804 links connecting them (compared to 539 lexias in *Afternoon* with 951 links, and 323 lexias in *Patchwork Girl* with 462 links) . In *Victory Garden* there are also several original features like a menu of preordered paths, and a map of the "Victory Garden" - this map differs fundamentally from the cognitive maps representing the hypertextual structure employed in Patchwork Girl (and in the PC version of Afternoon) (More about these maps and their differences, see my PhD thesis, Chapter 5 "Visual Structuring of Hyperfiction Narratives", http://www.jyu.fi/~koskimaa/thesis)

Victory Garden - an overview

Victory Garden (Macintosh version) employs the most simple variant of reader interfaces *Story Space* offers. The navigating mainly happens through a toolbar with five functions: the backtrack button (takes you back to the previously read lexia), the link list button (opens a window listing all the links leaving from the current lexia, each link is named and the title of destination lexia is told), the yes/no button (can be used to answer possible questions in the text), the print button (makes a hardcopy of the lexia), and the type-in field. Usually each lexia has a default link, that is, simply by pressing the return key the reader can follow a path provided by the author. Pressing the control keys shows the anchor words / phrases by framing them (double clicking these words activates links which may differ from the default link). In short, the reader may move in the text by pressing the return key after reading each lexia, double clicking anchor words, opening the link list and selecting a link from the list, by typing a word in the type-in box (an alternative to double clicking anchor words), or, back-tracking her way.

From the title page on, the reader has several options for going forward. She can go to the map and choose one of the lexias presented there as her starting point. She can also go to the page listing "Paths to Explore", thirteen preordered pathways through the text each concentrating on different aspects of the narrative materials (some of them loosely organised around various characters appearing in the text). From the "Paths to Explore" there is a default link - which is easily left unnoticed - leading to a lexia listing "Paths to Deplore", offering seven more preordered paths (it should be noted that even when choosing one of these paths, the reader may always choose not to follow the default links and select an alternative narrative strain). There is still the possibilty of going to a lexia where you can build up a sentence by repeatedly choosing a word from two alternatives offered. This way several different sentences can be constructed, each leading to different starting points (some of the sentences coinciding with the starting of "Paths to Explore" & "Paths to Deplore").

Once having started reading the reader confronts fragments of narratives (usually several clearly successive lexias developing a certain story strand), letters, tv-report transcripts, citations from books fictional and theoretical, song lyrics and other various materials. Most of the materials are related to the Gulf War in 1991 - either things happening in the Gulf area, or, meanwhile in the home front. The Gulf War figures heavily in all the story lines, if not concretely influencing characters' lives, then at least as a background force for larger changes in society affecting indirectly (but not a bit more weakly) their lives.

There are direct citations from Jorge Luis Borges' short stories "Garden of Forking Paths" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", as well as more or less implicit allusions to them. There are also mentions to or citations from such novels as *Don Quixote*,

Tristram Shandy, and *Finnegan's Wake* ("riverRerun"!). The theoretical materials include citations from Donna Haraway, Neil Postman, Arthur C. Kroker, Jay David Bolter, Michael Joyce etc.

Victory Garden, like *Afternoon*, is dominated by plain alphanumeric text. The map in the beginning is one obvious exception; there are also a few lexias with crude graphics (see picture), the signatures in letters are reproduced in handwriting, and there is even one crossword-cum-concrete poetry style lexia. The letters differ from other text by different font type.
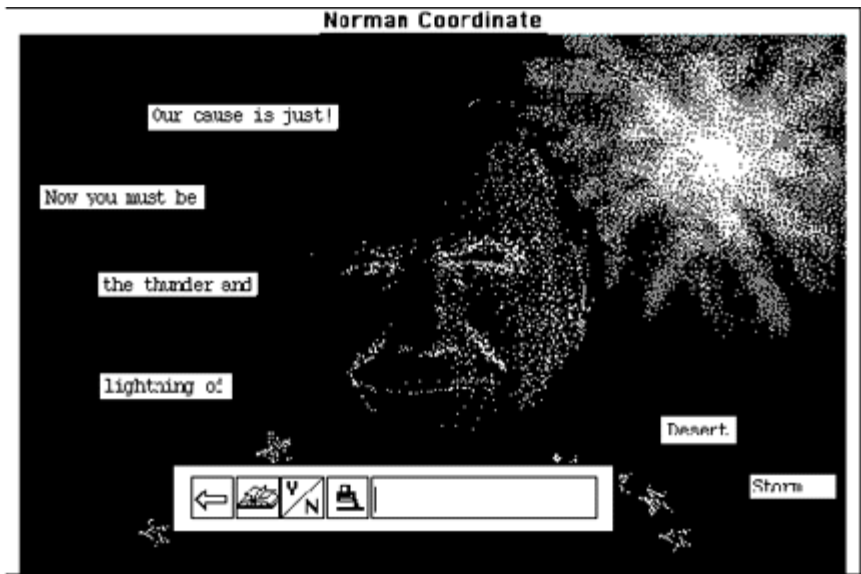
Main story-lines and characters

The main characters in *Victory Garden* are people from a University town Tara, most of them teachers or students in the University. Thea Agnew is a professor of rhetorics (or something like that), sisters Veronica and Emily Runbird are her pupils, although Emily is currently in military service in the Gulf War, handling mail in the head quarters. Thea is also the head of a Curriculum Revision Committee (for studies in Western Culture). An eccentric scholar Boris Urquhart is supposedly an expert in Virtual Reality technologies, employed in a top secret project, and also in the Curriculum Revision Committee. Harley Morgan is a television journalist who has refused to go to the Gulf Area, and is spending his "stress-leave" in Tara with his girl friend Veronica Runbird (several years older than Veronica, he has earlier had an

affair with Thea, too). Emily Runbird, on the other hand, has an affair with Boris Urquhart, but his former boy friend Victor Gardner (!) is still desperately in love with her. Leroy is Thea's teenage son, who has left his school to make his "On the Road" tour a la Jack Kerouac. Gerard Madden is an F.B.I. agent on a minor job in Tara, and is an old acquitance of Harley. Miles MacArthur, Boris' colleague, provost Tate, and Thea's adversary in the Committee, professor Heidel, as well as Victor's student friend Jude Busch all have their parts in the stories too.

There are several scenes which occur in most of the preordered paths, identically or with little variation. The order in which these scenes are related differs quite a lot from one path to another, but mostly they can be arranged in a chronological order. As Jill Walker has finely showed in her paper "Piecing together and Tearing apart: finding the story in *afternoon*", Gérard Genette's narratological concepts dealing with the temporal order of narratives can be employed with hypertext narratives too - even though the narration in *Victory Garden* is anachronical (events are narrated in a different order from which they happened), and even though there are differences in this anachronical order in different paths, there are still indexes or markers enough to help the reader put them in a particular order (Walker 1999; Genette 1980). That is, we really are dealing with anachronical, not achronical narration (where no definite order for events can be found). This does not hold for the whole of *Victory Garden*, to be exact, but we can take it as a starting point.

There is a sequence in which Thea, Veronica, Harley, and Miles are swimming in the Whitman Creek natural park area, when they learn that the area has been sold to a company planning to build a golf course up stream, effectively ruining the whole creek. Immediately after hearing about these plans, their swimming is further disturbed by a protest against the plans, ending with a scene where one of the protesters declares himself to be Uqbari the Prophet, condemns the plans to ruin the creek, and finally, symbolically, urinates into the creek in front of a tv-crew in a helicopter. Later the same evening, there is a big costume party hosted by provost Tate. After quite a carnevalesque party scene the provost invites Thea, Harley, and Veronica to his office to discuss Boris, wondering if he is in his mind (after the Uqbari the Prophet scandal).

One of the key scenes is another party, this time a much smaller one, in Thea's house, which is disturbed by another appearance of Uqbari - this time he comes up in an army style camouflage outfit, and with a gun which he fires a couple of times in Thea's back yard and flees. Then Urquhart goes to the garage, meets agent Madden there, who asks him a few questions about the security of the University computer network, also inquiring Urquhart's opinion of Jude Busch, possibly in liaison to assumed security violations. Urquhart leaves in Harley's car, and when he sees Madden tailing him, he tries to get rid of him, nearly crashing with a truck, and finally ending up at the student bar *Just Say No Cafe* where he meets Harley, takes him along and continues running. Finally, they are stopped by the police, who, in a

very Rodney King affairesque scene, start beating Harley (who is black). But then the police see Harley's press id, realising he is a CNN reporter - agent Madden rushes to the scene at the same time, and Urquhart uses the occassion to flee once again. He runs to the old observatory, where he was going all along, to meet provost Tate who works there. From that point on the story branches to several variations which I shall be dealing in more detail below.

There is also a scene happening in Saudi Arabia, describing Emily's experiences during the first air raid after the War has finally started. It includes Emily's and her sergeant's discussion about Emily's loves, as well as various stories told by other G. I.s. The overall lenght of this episode differs from one path to another. One of the paths ends in a black screen with no default links suggesting that Emily and her group are victims of an Iraqi missile.

There are several such quite clear-cut sequences like these, one describing a long and serious discussion between Thea and her son Leroy; a telephone discussion between Thea and Heidel, where the latter informs Thea that he has used fraud means to force Thea to leave her position as the Commision Head; description of the first war evening when Thea and Veronica are watching the television coverage not quite believing the war has really broke out, when their evening is disturbed by Omega-fraternity boys who have come to protest outside "leftist radical" Thea Agnew's house; an intimate scene between Jude and Victor where Jude acts up as Emily etc.

The sequences listed above are not told in succession like this - they are intertwined with each other so that the reader can follow one scene for some lexia's length, then the focus shifts to another scene, then possibly to a third one, before returning to the first one. This is pretty much like any old modern fiction, where several story lines are intertwined, but usually easy enough to follow.

Even though the different paths give different weight to different scenes and characters, most of them include at least something of all the central scenes. There are exceptions though: in the "NORMAN - The Path of Glory", for example, Victor (and scenes related to him) is not mentioned at all. After the first readings of *Victory Garden* one can easily accept Robert Coover's description of it as quite a typical academic novel, after all. But there is much more to it actually.

Hypertextual Structure in Victory Garden

As said, *Victory Garden* offers twenty preordered paths through which the reader can traverse simply by pressing the return key after each lexia. These paths differ greatly for their length and coherence. The shortest path is just four lexias long,

while "The Grand Tour" comprises some four hundred of the 993 lexias. "NORMAN - the path of glory" is a very coherent, one is tempted to say traditional, narrative, where Emily is the main character. The scenes from Saudi Arabia and Tara are in balance, and letters from Tara to Emily, as well as letters from Emily, are also in an important role. Even though absent from Tara, Emily is clearly the central figure so that events in Tara are all somehow related to her.

The paths have two ways to end. The first way is to deny the default link - at some point pressing the return key will produce only an audible beep. This is as close as hypertext can come to an ending but this is no definite ending in any way (Jane Yellowlees Douglas especially has dealt with the question of ending and closure in hypertext fiction: see Douglas 1992, 118-152; 1994). First, there may be other links from the lexia, even though there are no default links. Thus, by double clicking yielding words or activating the link list, the reader can still find links leading further from the provisional ending. And even though there were no links at all, it is always possible to backtrack one's way and make a different choice somewhere at an earlier stage and that way totally avoid the dead end. So, after a path of lexias connected with default links, the author may suggest a possible ending by denying any further default links, but this is no more than a suggestion which the reader may or may not accept.

The other way to provide "a sense of an ending" is to make an infinite loop - from one point the story returns to an earlier phase in the path, from which it then continues exactly the same way until it reaches the point from where it is once again thrown back to the earlier phase. Thus, the path does not exactly end, but there is nothing new happening anymore; using Douglas' distinction we can say that in a case like this there is no ending of a conventional kind, but some kind of closure is nevertheless provided. Naturally, the same precautions hold here as with the no-default option: the reader may, at any point in the infinite loop choose an alternative link leading her out of the loop.

We can think of a third solution for ending, too, even though I find it much more problematic than the previous two. The reader may always take it as her task to exhaust all the possibilities in the hypertext. In a more or less systematic way she can try to reach each and every single lexia in the hypertext. Even though there may always be readers finding this the best attitude towards hypertexts, there may not be too many hypertext fictions offering even a theoretical possibility to succeed in this attempt. With texts like *Afternoon* and *Patchwork Girl* (or, *Reagan Library* and *Hegirascope*) it does not take too much time and effort to read the lexias in their totality - it can even be argued that even though these texts quite naturally do invoke the idea of parallel or intersecting alternative possible stories, deep inside they also suggest precisely this exhaustive (or nearly exhaustive) reading as the "real story" - Douglas' description and interpretation of Afternoon illustrates quite convincingly this point. But then, this has to be just one very special sub-class of hypertext,

intentionally limited to a relatively small and dense web of storylines, and also, I would like to argue, intentionally subscribing to the aesthetics of traditional narrative form.

But there is a mathematical logic behind the lexia-link structure making it unavoidable that a relatively small number of lexias and a relatively restricted number of links between them, in any case, produce quite a great number of possible paths through the hypertext web. Because of this, the whole of hypertext is, quite soon, out of full authorial control. The order in which story segments are read, the local context for each lexia, determines to some extent how they are interpreted, and in some cases the cumulative effect of unpredicted interpretations may really produce a new story altogether. Of course, at least since Stanley Fish's essay "Interpreting the Variorum", we have been confronted with the idea that any stable, printed text may be interpreted in totally different ways in different interpretative communities (Fish 1976; reprinted in Fish 1980). With hypertexts the situation is different, though: even if we belong to the same interpretive community and thus share the same interpretative conventions, we can still end up with radically different interpretations. The difference is located in the functioning of the text itself, not in the interpretative strategies.

This discussion of the possibility of exhausting a hypertext, and of totalistic control of hypertext narrative, is highly relevant for *Victory Garden*. With as many as 993 lexias and 2804 links the task of reaching and reading every lexia is a serious challenge - since a hypertext fiction, in Espen Aarseth's terminology, is not random, but restricted in access, many lexias require the reader to go through a certain path of lexias before it can be reached. (Thinking in other terms, it is the equivalent of some 200 hundred print pages, which is still, in novelistic terms, quite a modest number.) Because of that, reading all the lexias in *Victory Garden* means that one has to read, or at least skip through, many of the lexias several times. Douglas estimates that reading a five-hundred-lexia hypertext requires as much as seventy hours, and compares that to the six to twelve hours required for an average reader to consume a three-hundred-page novel. (1992, 50). Trying to comprehend all the possible permutations of orders in which the lexias may be read, is well beyond the capacity of any individual reader. Thus, even though still a limit case, the *Victory Garden* is clearly pointing towards the kind of hypertext fiction which, because of its size, is theoretically and practically, inexhaustible. Because of this, I will rule out the exhaustive reading as a definitive ending for *Victory Garden* (there are other reasons too, to be dealt with later).

Singular Loops

One of the hypertextual structures in Victory Garden is what I call a singular loop (as opposed to an indefinite loop). In singular loop the reader is taken back to a previous point in the path she is reading, but the next time around not. There is a loop, a sequence of lexias read twice, but after that the path continues forward:
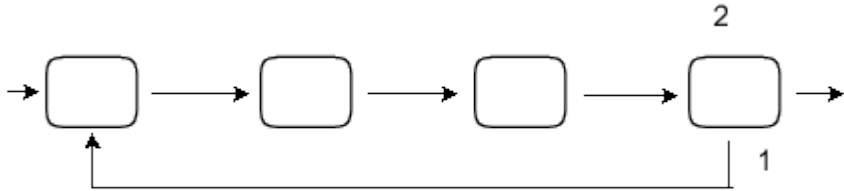
This particular device is used in a few places in *Victory Garden*, but usually there is no clear motivation for this. One explanation could be - and this is related to one interpretation I'll give for the whole text - invoking a certain sense of malfunctioning, of an unintentional lapse in the running of the narration. With loops, both infinite and singular, the question of repetition is foregrounded. Jill Walker has written about the "Nietzschean repetition" (following J. Hillis Miller), repetition with difference in *Afternoon* (Walker 1999). With loops the difference follows from the backward movement in reading - it is like a concretization of Peter Brooks' idea of "anticipating retrospection" in reading: we read expecting to get a thorough understanding of a situation, trusting that that understanding will help us better comprehend the things we are currently reading (Brooks 1984). With loops in hypertext, in the occasion where some (local / temporary) conclusion is reached, the reader is taken back to read the previous moments anew in the light of that conclusion.

There is one particularly interesting occasion mixing loops and repetition with variation. The moment when Urquhart - after the runaway from police - arrives at the Observatory and meets provost Tate, in one path, will be repeated not once but twice, and in each case with concrete difference, not just difference produced by the repetition. The titles of the lexias in that sequence are as follows:

"Ring" -> "Help Mister Wizard" -> "Fool's Errand" -> "Ring Cycle" -> "Errant Fool" -> "In Need of Help" -> "Ring Around" -> "Arrant Fool" -> "Helpful"

The beginning paragraphs of each starting lexia seem to be commenting on this exact cycle structure:

> "Ring": U ran through the dark field, slipping and scrambling on the dry ground. He knew Madden was behind him somewhere. He did not look. [...]

> "Ring Cycle": Once more U ran through the dark field, slipping and scrambling on the dry ground. He knew Madden was behind him somewhere but he did not look. [...]

> "Ring Around": U is once again still always running through that dark field, slipping scrambling through his own footprints on the dry ground. He knows Madden is behind him somewhere but he doesn't dare look. You've had this dream before, you know.

This sequence comes (in some of the preordered paths, at least) right after a long sequence where Urquhart is fleeing first from agent Madden, then from the highway patrolmen, and then from Madden again - so even if you happened to read only the third variation of the "Ring" (starting with "Ring Around") you could easily interpret the beginning in the light of these previous events, totally ignorant of the other variations. Other variations during this cycle are less significant:

> "Help Mister Wizard": [...] U picked up the book. It was quite heavy. Ponderous.

> "In Need of Help": [...] U picked up the book. It was very heavy. Voluminous.

> "Helpful": [...] U picked up the book. It was very heavy. Massive.

The title "Ring Cycle" invokes in quite an ironical way (this is no real loop, or, ring, at all since the lexias are not the same but just closely resemble each other) an allusion to Wagner's opera cycle, and also to the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk. This again can be related to a more general interpretation, where Gesamtkunstwerk could seen as an early version of virtual reality (and multimedia). What is important here is that this time, when the repetition is only approximate (the three instances differing in details), it has a totally different effect than with real loops: this time it is more like different drafts, or adjustments, trying to find the exact atmosphere.

This again nicely demonstrates the difference between hypertextual semantics and narrative semantics: narratively speaking we certainly are dealing with repetition; the hypertextual structure here is plainly a linear path (as shown in the title list above).

Frame stories - conspiracy, virtual reality, dream as hypertext

The obvious explanation for *Victory Garden*'s structure of alternative story paths is Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths" - the title refers to that story, Borges is mentioned in the credits "for seeing it all before" and there are instances in the text itself explaining that relation:

At the time of the last great War, Jorge Luis Borges imagined a fiction that would not conform to lines of determinism or destiny -- a fantastic Chinese novel called The Garden of Forking Paths. Now we find ourselves living once more through world conflict, admittedly of a very different kind from the events of 1914-18 or 1939-45.

There is also one lexia including a dense summary of the idea of the "garden of forking paths":

All the Above

In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pen, he chooses - simultaneously - all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork.

- Borges his Garden

In this sense *Victory Garden* can be seen as a follow up for Moulthrop's early work "Forking Paths" - he says that explicitly on his web site:"*Victory Garden* is an original work based partly on the structure of '<u>The Garden of Forking Paths</u>'" (from the menu in the left frame, choose "forking paths"). Robert Coover has interpreted the map in the beginning as an illustration of either a garden with paths and benches, or, a graveyard (rectangles being not benches but graves) - the garden referring to Borges' story, the graveyard to Gulf War casualties.

Even though the idea of forking paths must be seen as the dominant metaphor for the overall structure of *Victory Garden*, it is not the only possibility. Following the proper paths the reader will confront a sequence where it is explained that the research Boris Urquhart is doing is about transforming a person's dreams into text. But that is not all - other persons may pick up things in the transcript and give related feedback to the dreamer, thus "directing" the flow of her dream:

Loop

"The transaction loop is simple," Urquhart told them. "NVACS compiles its transcript, which is displayed in real time on the monitor here." Indicating the western wall. "The transcript takes the form of a simple constructive hypertext with unconstrained possibilities for branching."

Tate smiled indulgently. "What's that you say, Boris?"

"Transcript contains many words. Pick a word, any word; pass it to the computer. NVACS specifies its semantic and iconolectic correlatives then formulates an appropriate Subliminal Suggestion Holoform (SSH), which it feeds back to the human interactor through his personal listening device."

> Tate pointed quizzically at his ears as if to say, you mean *headphones*? Urquhart nodded. "Ah," said Tate. "Thanks."[1]

There are several lexias which clearly describe a dream, or other dreamlike experiences - these are clearly typographically marked to differ from other lexias. A "minimal" interpretation could be that these dream sequences represent Urquhart's dreams-as-hypertexts experiments, or, simulate them (the reader's choices imitating feedback from fictional observers of the experiment). But the general logic of interpretation works so that once we detect the dream-as-hypertext structure in one part of the work, there is always the possibility to widen that interpretation to go with the whole work - so the frame number two is this dream-as-hypertext version, in which we can either read *Victory Garden* as a record of one such experiment (or several experiments), or, as a simulation of that kind of experiment, the reader assuming the position of the observer of the fictional experiment.

There are also several places stating that Urquhart is studying Virtual Reality - and there is even a description of a course he is (should be) giving on the topic:

> 8088
>
> CS/HUM 8088 - *Special Topics in Cybernetic Arts and Sciences: Simulation and Subversion*
>
> B. Urquhart * Tu&F 2000-2130 * Tower 606
>
> *Do you suffer from frequent headaches? Believe in extraterrestrial life? Have you ever had an out-of-body experience, with or without the use of drugs? Do you watch a lot of television? Are you a proficient COBOL programmer?*
>
> This is a graduate research seminar concentrating on aesthetic and political implications of virtual reality and cyberspace technologies. Readings in cybernetics, informatics, communications theory, detective fiction. Frequent quizzes.
>
> *Note: This course is not available on interactive videodisc.*

It is possible that Boris is studying both virtual realities and dreams-as-hypertexts, but is also possible that, since his work is classified, the virtual reality is merely a cover. And of course, we can take the truly forking paths type approach and determine that in some possible story he is dealing with dreams and hypertexts, in others with virtual realities, and still, in some with both. Whatever the solution, the fact remains that there are several mentions of Boris' interest in virtual realities. Also, there are some passages which strongly suggest that at least some of the scenes in *Victory Garden* are representations of virtual reality experiments; there are some lexias which clearly allude to such cyberpunk classics as Vernor Vinge's "True Names" or William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, or the not-so-classic motion picture *Lawnmover Man*.

Create

What makes you think of me as paranoid? Could be the way everyone spends his time plotting against you.

Let me tell you about my vision, Tate relates, a vision of the End of History: All the experience of humankind, Tate orates, is a huge cosmic riddle whose answer is - whose answer is Something Out Of Nothing

...and we have only now entered into the age of autonomous and self-modifying simulacra, the moment of convergence between the IS and the COULD BE. Which is where you come in.

U must engineer a System - or be enraged by another man's. [...]

Tate Reboots~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

You find the nearest rheostat and twist it till the room dims down to near blackness. This takes Tate by surprise and he's caught up in the state-change algorithm, before he knows what's going on he's been redefined down to a nearly immobile pair Tate of eyes.

- Dirty trick, Tate protests, trying furiously to invoke a subroutine.

You allow your palm to linger over the switch. - Don't tempt me. Now what was that about a mysterious speaker?

Tate winks his left eye three times. - ESCAPE-PF13? he tries. Command-period?

- Talk, you insist.

- CONTROL-ALT-DELETE! he cries and vanishes in a flash of blue light.

Once again, we are left with the feeling that possibly all we have encountered so far is just some kind of virtual reality - possibly all of Tara, and everything else, including the Gulf War, is virtual reality simulation created for some purpose not known to us. This would be very much like the plot in Philip K. Dick's novel *Time Out of Joint* (1959), or more recently, in the film *Truman Show*). This interpretation would also explain the structure of forking paths - with simulation it is always possible to change some variables and make another run mapping an alternative course of events. There could be a sub-experiment going on trying to find out how Boris would react to different scenarios like Emily's death in Saudi Arabia.

And finally, we can never forget the old conspiracy-paranoia solution. There are clear evidences of Boris believing in some kind of conspiracy; belief in different orders of

conspiracies (or paranoias) could be possibly attached to several other characters too:

> Coincidence[...]Tate opened his hands, palms up. "History, Agent Madden. Human affairs. The struggles of nations. What do you suppose the odds are of such a rare astronomical event happening just as the industrialized world enters its most significant military conflict since the Second World War?"

> As would most of us, Madden immediately heard music: the four-note signature of theTwilight Zone theme, cycling over and over in his head. He knew the spy business had had its share of eccentrics in the old days, but Tate was something special. Not wishing to show disrepect, he kept these thoughts to himself. "Coincidence," he said.

> Big Games"Big games and nasty games, kiddo. The war's just for starters. There's some major changes in store, especially for those of us without a penis. You know what they're thinking. For ten years we tried to teach you Family Values, but you wouldn't toe the line, bitch. So now we'll have to try some new rules. Yeah. They'll come after abortion, affirmative action, and free speech early in the day, but why stop there - why not go all the way? Why not give up this pretense of equality and accept a society with different levels of entitlement, different classes of citizenship? It's their economic policy, after all. So why not go all the way and repeal the 19th Amendment?"

> "Whoa," Veronica responded. "Sounds like you've been on the Western Civ warpath too long."

> "Bingo," Thea cried. "Everything fucking well connects."

There is one hint of what the supposed bigger plot behind all might be about. It is related to Japanese Master Johndan's ideas of "Shadow Economy" and its systematic application as a huge simulation:

> We Can Work It Out

> "I'm talking about a systematic application of Master Johdan's vision. Think about it, Boris. A vast simulation embracing all aspects of economic activity, a gigantic competitive structure with hundreds of millions of players - or are they workers? - who would in fact derive their livelihood from subsidies paid out according to their performance in the game. A game involving technologies, politics, laws, regulations, ideas, trends, fashions, philosophies, belief systems. I'm talking about greatest imaginative endeavor in human history." [...]

So, after all, all or some of the forking story paths may be fabrications of paranoid minds. All in all, we have four different frames with which to motivate the structure in *Victory Garden*: the forking paths idea (which is closely linked to possible worlds

semantics), the dream-as-hypertext, the virtual reality simulation, and, conspiracy paranoia. It should be stressed that none of the above excludes any other frame. Thus, Boris may be a real paranoiac used in a virtual reality experiment being a part of some larger plot etc. In this aspect it differs from *Afternoon* and *Patchwork Girl*, both of which are built around one central concept: in *Afternoon* (according to a paradigmatic interpretation of Jane Y. Douglas [Douglas 1992, 118-150]). the sense of guilt of the protagonist is the cause for delaying the final revelation, leading to all kinds of digressions; in *Patchwork Girl*, more explicitly, the equivalence of Frankenstein's Monster and a text (both being patchworks of their kind).

Intertextual Fields of Reference

I will next turn to intertextual references and allusions in *Victory Garden*, which back up the different interpretational frames described above.

1. Borges' "Garden of Forking paths" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

There is the direct citation from "Garden" (see above), and a scene from a seminar where Miles MacArthur discusses the story with his (actually, Boris') students. While the students do not find much of interest in Borges' story - ("I think Borges was an intellectual masturbator" as one of the students comments), MacArthur gives a positive interpretation of the story anyway:

> Work
>
> "No, wait," Macarthur maintained, "you're not getting it. We're talking about possibilities and alternatives. Try for a minute to see beyond necessity, beyond determinism. Who says there's only one way? Who says it only happens once? If we use our imaginations we can learn to see the world differently, and with that vision we can create systems that aren't constrained to singularity. Multiple values, multiple horizons. That's what the shift to virtuality is all about - to create new worlds that make room for difference. Why, someday we might even be able to bend time itself..."

This is also connected to virtual realities by a student:

> With Mirrors
>
> "The trouble is," Jude Busch noted, "what that story has to say about time is really a lot of horseshit. Time is a garden of possibilities, some kind of cosmic

> combinatorial, a universal lottery." She reached over and poked Victor in the ribs. "I can see how that connects to VR, even if some of us are too slow."
>
> "Time becomes the matrix of all simulations," Amanda put in, her prodigiousness showing.

This is an exceptionally explicit case of metafictionality, where the text itself discusses and proposes the way in which itself should or could be interpreted. But there is another dimension to the relation: *Victory Garden* as a rewriting or appropriation of "Garden of Forking paths".

Quite apparently, there is a correspondence in names, other than the title alone. Boris Urquhart is usually referred to as just U. which is read like the name of Yu (Tsun), and there is an agent Madden in both texts. Yu has to kill his friend Albert to indicate to the Germans which French city will be the target of an attack - Moulthrop has interpreted this by saying how Yu has to reduce the person Albert to mere sign in order to fulfill his task (Moulthrop 1991, 119-124). When Urquhart arrives at the Observatory, he tells he has to kill Tate - to reduce the multiplicity of virtual realities? There is a war in the background in both stories and from that analogue we may infer that also in Urquhart's case it is the war that is the motivating force for everything.

Here comes to play another hypotext by Borges, namely "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius". The lexia "Story of My Life" refers to the story:

> Borges referred to a place called Uqbar, supposedly "a region of Iraq or Asia Minor" which was in fact unreal. Uqbar is brought to you by the people who invented Tlön, a conspiracy to replace the bad old world with a novus ordo saeculorum. There's a lot of that going around.

Urquhart uses the role name "Uqbari the Prophet" - Uqbari, that is, a citizen of Uqbar. Thus, Urquhart is part of the "novus ordo saeculorum", The New World Order, which, not coincidentally at all, is located in the region of Iraq. More "realistic" intepretation might be that Urquhart is an Islamist activist, but more convincingly, part of some even bigger plan of New World Order. Or still, Uqbar is figment of the Tlön people; that is, Urquhart lives in a fictional world of Virtual Reality simulation. Choose your own favourite conspiracy.

2. William Burrough's cut up technique

There is one sequence in *Victory Garden* which works as a digitalized version of Burrough's cut up technique. All the titles of the lexias in this sequence are just a few letters long fragments, and the contents of the lexias are (at least seemingly) random bits and pieces from previous lexias:

Th

A large man wearing a bowling shirt and headphones was stretched out on a truly ugly Italian couch. His sleeping cap was wired for EEG. It was at this point that something entirely plausible happened.

Let me explain.

Miles wasn't sure he wanted to know what the suit looked like once it got wet.

the 38th Vice President of the United States, Spiro T. "My Kind of Guy" Agnew big schnozz beady eyes and all

"Live and in person, the fascist pig god himself."

A little paranoia never hurt anyone, Tate insinuates, nor for that matter a whole lot.

ESCAPE VELOCITY, the P.A. announces. The audience stands to applaud.

What was it, too much Liquid Sunshine back in the sixties?

From "Escape velocity" to "applaud" the two sentences are from the lexia "Miles & Miles"[2]; "A little paranoia" sentence from a lexia titled "A Little Paranoia"; "the 38th vice president" from the lexia "Wallshot" etc. This sequence could be interpreted as a lesson in cut up, and a key to understand the hypertext structure as a device with which the reader may "cut up" their own narratives.

And one should not overlook the mention of Liquid Sunshine in a passage which is formally linked to Burroughs - add to the list of paranoia and conspiracy also the drug induced hallucinations.

3. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*

Stuart Moulthrop is introduced in the leaflet attached to *Victory Garden*, as: "In 1975 he read *Gravity's Rainbow* and became an English major". Even without this knowledge of Moulthrop's enthusiasm about *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), it must be one of the primary hypotexts for any attentive reader. There are no explicit references - curiously enough - to Pynchon's magnum opus, but more indirect allusions all the more. There are certain scenes which resemble situations in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Emily's waiting in the shelter while planes are screaming outside parallels with Gravity's Rainbow's opening (and closing) scene where people are sitting in a theater hearing the screaming outside - possibly a V2 which would blow the whole place to pieces, just like Emily's shelter may be the target of an Iraqi Scud missile. But mainly the similarities are in the huge web of entangled plots and

subplots. In a recent essay about misreading and "interstitial fiction" Moulthrop has quoted the following paragraph from *Gravity's Rainbow*:

> "This is some kind of plot, right? Slothrop sucking saliva from velvet pile.
>
> "Everything is some kind of a plot, man," Bodine laughing.
>
> "And yes but, the arrows are pointing all different ways," Solange illustrating with a dance of hands, red-pointed fingervectors.
>
> Which is Slothrop's first news, out loud, that the Zone can sustain many other plots besides those polarized upon himself... that these are the els and busses of an enormous transit system here in the Raketenstadt, more tangled even than Boston's - and that by riding each branch the proper distance, knowing when to transfer, keeping some state of minimum grace though it might often look like he's headed the wrong way, this network of all plots may yet carry him to freedom. (603)

This could as well be a description of *Victory Garden* - and after this we can offer one more interpretation for the map; it could be a transportation track plan with stops (as entrance points to the different plots). In *Gravity's Rainbow* the German V2 missiles are in a central role (the title suggesting the parabel path of a ballistic missile; and one of the characters is able to predict the missile attacks - he is so conditioned that he gets a hard on always a few minutes before the attack...) and while in *Victory Garden* there is just the Saudi Arabia scene which is directly dealing with missile attacks, there is one interesting by-way: in Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* the protagonist is kept in a virtual reality in order to provide him with safe surroundings; but all the while he is partaking in TV quiz program in which he actually calculates the targets of extraterrestrial missile attacks! It may be a bit far-fetched, but tempting anyway, to assume Urquhart's work, whatever its apparent form, is actually doing some kind of military calculations (there is even the strong science fictional element in the Observatory scene hinting that there may be something happening in the astronomical scale while everybody's attention is on the Gulf War).

Also, the simulation-application of Master Johndan's "Shadow Economy" is just the type of "second order plot" (about second order plots, see Lyotard (1991, 27) any Pynchon reader would immediately find familiar.

One of the most important narrative techniques in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the way how Pynchon veils the changes in narrative levels - the narration may shift from representing the textual actual world ("fictional reality") to representing some textual alternative world (like, a person's dream, or as often in *Gravity's Rainbow*'s case, hallucinations) without giving any clear marks of this change (a thorough analysis of this device in *Gravity's Rainbow* is in McHale [1992, 61-114]). Very much the same thing is happening in *Victory Garden* - at least if we choose to interpret it in the

dream-as-hypertext, or, virtual reality simulation framework - telling which scenes belong to the textual actual world, which to textual alternative worlds is totally impossible.

Competing Interpretations - Loose Ends

As is clear by now, I hope, there are several possible interpretations for *Victory Garden*. All these competing interpretations share the common property of being very flexible, and also strongly indeterminate - despite that they still can not in any way explain each and every aspect of the large web of *Victory Garden*. There are always some loose ends, which will not have a "natural" place in one or another composition of the larger picture.

Interpreting *Victory Garden* means mainly to try and give it a structure - to try to describe how the mechanism works. In other words, trying to explain the poetics of *Victory Garden*. It refers towards even larger and more complex works, in regard to which there is no sense anymore to talk about individual story lines or scenes at all - all that may be reachable is some kind of understanding of the metastructures which govern the whole and set limits to possible actualisations.

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Notes

1. Michael Joyce's term "constructive hypertext" is used here, and in another lexia there is a quite a long citation of Joyce's definition for the term. Another important cybertext author could be mentioned here, John Cayley. In his Book *Unbound* the reader may choose a word or a passage from the text she is reading, which is then fed back to the program and used as a factor in generating the continuation for the text - a procedure which closely resembles Urquhart's explanation of what's happening in his experiment.

2. "Miles & Miles" is a good example of Moulthrop's way to use linguistic puns (in very much the same way as Michael Joyce); "Miles & Miles" is a dream sequence in which a character is running through a stadium which is full of Miles Macarthur replicas - " you must be passing forty or fifty Miles a minute".