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HYPERTEXT 2000: A rather subjective conference report

By Anja Rau

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From May 30 to June 4, the Menger Hotel in San Antonio (USA) hosted the millennium hypertext, the most literary ACM hypertext conference so far. Even if, once more, the sessions for the "systems people" and the "literary people" had been organized in a way that prevented the subcultures from eavesdropping on each other, in Texas, the belles hyperlettres were loud and proud as never before: A keynote on comics (Scott McCloud presented a graphic reminder of how literature's roots have always lain in multi media and state of the art technology), a lit-crit Nelson Newcomer Prize (and the winner is: Susana Pajares Tosca for her "Pragmatics of Links") and hyperfiction readings that, unlike last year in Darmstadt (see report), were not relegated to the broom closet. The Ballroom saw standing ovations for the keynotes as well as the readings.

Yes, indeed, hyperfiction can be fun! It is common for hyper-lit-critics to confess not so secretly that most of the time, reading (let alone writing about) hyperfiction is a real pain - but the live performances were really enthralling. Jane Yellowlees Douglas, Deena Larsen, Robert Kendall, Marjorie Lusebrink and the Unknown-guys did a call-by-call clicking of their pieces and thus created a text that was interactive in the truer sense of the word. In fact, it seemed that the explanations, intonations or merely the choices of entrance point that were part of the live action helped to create meaning which the solitary reader had not been able to construe from the text.

The literary guys no longer provide the background music to the receptions. Instead, they have started asking the questions that tend to be forgotten among talk of open hypermedia systems, dynamic linking-machines, adaptive information systems, visualization and multimedialization: What is hypertext? What can we do with hypertext? And why does it fascinate us, still? (And what is text? And what about the link? And why doesn't the rest of the world (including those who provide funding) fall all over themselves when we bring hypertext to their departments?) At the same time, the writers quite self-confidently present the systems people with demands for custom-made authoring tools - although there are also those who want to adapt the technology to the need of the authors and those who enjoy writing with and against the limitations of a medium or a readily available technology.

The biggest problem of hyperfiction do not seem to be the adversities of technology: authors do write, both within and against existing authoring environments. However, readers do not seem to read enough. And this fact is very probably not due to the poor quality of the texts. The argument that this young genre has not had the time to produce any good specimen not longer measures up against the amount of rather good hypertexts that are being published. What is still lacking, however, is reasonable, international marketing. The praise of hyperfiction is still sung mostly by enthusiastic friend or colleagues who press 3,5" disks (they still exist) on you. Hyperfictions are rarely to be found in book- and software-stores, or on the shelf next to computer games and digital editions of the classics.

Of course there are certain factors inherent in the medium that make it difficult to create a market for digital literature. In the US, for example, it is not common to buy software in a bookstore, booksellers are afraid to ruin their turnover with unsellable CD-boxes. In Germany, on the other hand, there is the language-barrier: Hyperfiction is still an American genre, translations are difficult and German digital literature lives a secluded life on the web. Above all, it seems as if most hyperfiction-authors were on principle opposed to marketing their texts.

Circles and subcultures have always been part of literary culture and we all know the romantic tale of long-deserved but sadly postumous fame. But if we really want to give hyperfiction a chance to establish itself as digital literature - also as a counterweight to purely commercial multimedia production at large on- and offline - we have to accept the market - if only as one option among many.