23 reasons not to read *We Descend* by Bill Bly

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Abstract

01.It costs $20
02.The only time you sense history is when you open the envelope
03.The interface reminds you of times you do not want to be
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04.We use more of our brain than *We Descend* of its medium
05.Its writing style is undetermined
06.It is implausible
07.It is not exactly visually stunning
08.It is barely longer than a novella
09.There is no suspense
10.The narrative voices are unconvincing
11.It is superficial
12.It is written in the philosophy of early hypertext theory
13.You have a PC
14.It is linear
15.It contains poetry
16.This is a man's world, but it would be nothing…
17.The plot smells funny
18.It is crammed with clichés
19.It lacks sense of time and temporality
20.You care for your eyes
21.It is too tedious to read it as a joke
22.It is incoherent
23.You have read this review (you know it has a happy ending)

It costs $20

"We deliver wonderful hypertexts and fine hypertexts [sic] tools swiftly, anywhere in the world," it says on Eastgate Systems Inc's homepage (2001). The tagline, like the rest of the website has a commercial feel, whereas most of the discourse and theoretical basis is academic, grafted on early nineties literary hypertext theory. The presented hypertexts are not just wonderful, they are also *serious*. What is meant by "serious" is never specified, but it sounds… serious. *We Descend* can be purchased from Eastgate and costs $19.95. It is circumscribed by Robert Kendall as "The evocative exploration of the slippery nature of knowledge becomes the hypertext equivalent of a good old-fashioned page-turner." The name of the main protagonist of the hypertext is wrongly spelled as *Edgerus* (16 August, 2001).

The only time you sense history is when you open the envelope

We Descend was published in 1997 and contains two discs with coloured stickers indicating whether they are for Mac or PC (both are included). I had not installed software from a floppy disc for years. My Mac G3 does not have a disc drive. The PC version is designed for Windows 3.1: it has an edgy four-colour icon and it will not install into the "program files" folder. In a way, the discs and the ugly pre-95 windows make you feel more of a digital archaeologist than the actual "rummaging around" (documentation of Bly 1997) in Egderus Scriptor's archives.

The interface reminds you of times you do not want to be reminded of

Bill Bly, the author of *We Descend*, describes the "fine" hypertext tool Storyspace (Eastgate Systems 2001) as "crude" and "that versatile but also very quirky program (I descend into hypertext). *We descend* comes with the Storyspace Reader version 1.3.0 b 1. And quirky it is! Next to the left border of each content window (not the maps) there is a blue-greenish line without stylistic or decorative value, which makes me presume it is a technical flaw. Very annoying also is the fact that each window keeps resizing to some predefined value when you move forward and back, often not showing you all text. You cannot select text and copy/paste it into another program; you have to copy the entire node by selecting "copy" in the edit-menu.

There is a lost line underneath the row of buttons at the bottom of the window, i.e. it leads nowhere and it does not introduce any perspective or relief. Maps are illegible more often than not, especially the "Tree Map" and programming errors cause unexpected windows to open, displaying the same or different nodes. These issues may seem uninteresting from a theoretical point of view. For a reader however, ergonomics is a fact of life.

We use more of our brain than *We Descend* of its medium

Eastgate publishes "serious, *interactive* writing" [my italics]. Although I do not share Espen Aarseth's (Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature. Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) aversion of the word "interactive," I do share his opinion that sloganesque marketing of all kinds of multimedia and writing technologies as "interactive media" has sucked up most of the word's semantic content. Static hypertexts like *We Descend* can hardly be called interactive, i.e. more interactive than a traditional book. There is interaction on the semantic level of course. The reader may unveil different levels of meaning hidden by the author or produced by the text itself. However, calling this mere "interaction," appears a reduction. Moreover, the average hypertext reader is not more "writerly" (Barthes through George P. Landow: Hypertext 2.0: The convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology. Baltimore (Md.): Johns Hopkins University Press 1997) than a traditional one. Bookmarking and adding notes to the text is a cumbersome process. The only meaning left for the word "interactive" seems to be the activity of clicking.

Its writing style is undetermined

"Upon a closer look at him, I could see he was under some strain. I still could not fathom what he was doing here, but as he said nothing while I ministered to him, I concluded that it was I he had come to see, and that this was not official business" (/I pushed open my). The Superius Frater (abbot) is speaking very officially in this node: it is he who fathoms, ministers and concludes. The text appears an official document although there is clearly an unspecified implied reader. The author attempts to simulate voices, and he uses a high register to create a stately atmosphere. However, as the text continues in the following few nodes, the register is abandoned for no apparent reason. Dialogue is introduced and when asked how

long the rocks outside Mountain House have existed, the abbot starts *joking* (sic) "As long as I can remember" (/A profound silence). In the next node it gets worse (the abbot is still talking to Robenc about the rocks). '"I'm afraid I cannot advise you on that subject," I said, joining him at the window. "I am not quite old enough." The man's seriousness was beginning to spook me' (/"perhaps that is what). Examples galore! When Aric is telling his story there is an attempt to build up a horror atmosphere, which is again relentlessly abandoned. The inability of keeping to one register, spelling errors, typos and ungrammatical syntax make *We Descend* seem a hastily thrown together bunch of notes.

It is implausible

Although We Descend is presented as "Archives Pertaining to Egderus Scriptor," the entire work is written in end-twentieth century American English, with here and there attempts at older British, and high-school Latin for the names of characters. Moreover, the manuscripts bulk with dialogues--not exactly what you would expect--and some scenes are simply ridiculous.

> "Someone did," Robenc said grimly. "Someone who lives here.""But how could one of us do that?""Do what?""Tear off his arms and legs like that, drop them out of the sky"He leaned toward me again. "Something did that to him, it didn't just happen." (/someone did)

The characters in *We Descend* are not exactly a paragon of credibility either. Egderus is constantly rationalising the world around him through inner monologue. Sometimes he is Hercule Poirot, sometimes Isaac Newton. Anyhow, it is difficult to believe he is a small, cripple boy who grew up in a monastery. Aric, one of Robenc's soldiers, attacks 21 guards with a sword and survives. Finally when the Primus Frater (the bad guy) is attacked, he sets off an alarm and within a few minutes there is "a squad of stratioti pounding down the street (/This is exactly what). Eat your heart out Robin Hood!

It is not exactly visually stunning

It starts when installing Storyspace. A horrendous logo is accompanied by a ditto, disproportional shadow. There is no anti-aliasing in logo or letters. The status bar at the bottom of the Storyspace window is too small, so that the displayed letters do not appear properly: only the upper half of a 'p' for example. When the author has

not specified a title for a node, the title bar of the window displays the first few words of the node with an ugly slash (/) in front of it. Sometimes the text contains non-standard ASCII coded signs (e.g. MS Word produce), inducing even uglier thick vertical lines to appear after the slash. Finally, the photograph of the <u>author</u> in the biography is dithered to 16 colours, a strange sight on my true colour monitor.

When I double-click the *We Descend* icon on my desktop, three windows open on top of one another: one parent Storyspace window, a Storyspace Map and the content window containing a splash screen called SkyBanner. The whole looks dark and gloomy, industrial: not enticing at all. In the middle of all this button- and windowage a tiny picture tries finding its way into my view, an etching-like black-and-white illustration of which two other parts appear elsewhere in the novel (Cybermountain <u>Pre-paper</u>). It shows me a gorgeous view on a column at the entrance of a Mediterranean square. At the right upper corner there is a beautifully clouded sky that spontaneously makes me long for an espresso and my annual leave in equal measures. In the very corner, in the midst of what could be an Italian morning sky, there are the words 'We Descend.' We descend into the sky?

It is barely longer than a novella

"The text runs to some 40,000 words, contained in 598 nodes connected in various ways by 864 links" (<u>directions for reading</u> *We Descend)*. The Storyspace version is contained on one 1.44mb disc. When I export the hypertext to html, it becomes 2.69mb in 635 items. It contains the string bore(d)/boring 12 times. Long live electronic text.

There is no suspense

We Descend has archiving as its main theme. The act of reading and writing, rereading and rewriting and finally the text itself is encapsulated by the work's own semantics. "I must consider that sooner or later some of my colleagues might hear about what I am doing, and leap into the chase. Should that happen, I fear that the faint track left a millennium ago would become obliterated by their trampling feet" (/The next conference). Archiving as a theme is not exactly a guaranty for suspense. Moreover, most of *We Descend* sounds like the last thirty pages of a cheap detective novel. Each character in turn tells the other what they did or did not do. So despite some attempts to introduce tension --with Gig's death as the most memorable try-- the user experience is one of overall boredom.

The narrative voices are unconvincing

According to its documentation, *We Descend* is set in the distant future. A Scholar has discovered the fragmentary papers of a shadowy figure known as Egderus Scriptor, who lived some thousand years before him. Included in Egderus' collection are again transcriptions of older writings. In 'I descend into hypertext' Bly writes "Given the multiplicity of voices in *We Descend*, it seemed the best way to present their stories was as hypertext…" Using hypertext to more faithfully transcribe history and its multiplicity of voices is a noble cause, be it fiction or not. However, different voices need to be restrained within their scope and a coherent and interesting overall view with competing sub-views should be the aim.

If I may believe the inventory, there are some eight narrative voices in We Descend. Some are characters in the main story (Aric, Egderus, Historian, Superius Frater, Robenc); others only add notes (Scholar) or have no particular role at all (Remnant, the Ancients). Egderus is the main protagonist, but I want to briefly focus on the unstable basis of the other voices here. The Historian for example is problematic as a narrative voice, because his documents are supposed to be a historian's yet they are never written as such. "I'm not a historian, or wasn't before. I am a musician, or used to be. But music went the way of history" (/Nobody knew what I). Both (implied) reader and author are prominently present in the text. This is not a historian speaking: it is a character describing his state of mind. In this way, the historian's account has no extra narrative value with regard to Egderus's for example.

Another unbelievable or at least suspicious narrative voice is Aric's. Aric is a sturdy, somewhat naïve soldier working for Robenc. He enters the story at the hospital where Egderus is recovering from a serious beating by his master the Primus Frater. Aric's weight as a storyteller is immense: he describes Gig's death and his own role in the punishment of the Primus Frater. However, the character's view is hardly ever included in the account. Instead of focalising through the soldier, it is the same omniscient narrator as for Egderus who describes the events. One scarce attempt at focalisation is a failure. "It was possible that there was some secret door carved by the gods into the rocks, but I wanted to eliminate the more reasonable possibilities first" (/But I did, and began). The author appears to be unable to make the jump from a superstitious soldier to the narrator who (mostly through Egderus's eyes) analyses and rationalises the world. Finally, even in dialogue Aric is problematic. When describing how Gig chased younger brothers around Mountain House, he describes how "it didn't seem as if [Gig] was serious about hurting the poor boy" (/something was terribly). This is not Aric speaking, but the narrator indeliberately undermining the characters' credibility.

It is superficial

We Descend is divided into 'writing spaces' or pages mostly containing one or two paragraphs of text or dialogue. This implicates that each story action or description is either described in no more than a few paragraphs or is spread over several pages. Both solutions have their problems. In the first case, the events are described superficially. They do not fit within one or two paragraphs. In the second, dividing a description into different pages results in structural weakness, for the simple reason that a reader arriving at the second or third page of a description via an alternative reading path will not have a clue what the author is on about. Both strategies have been applied in *We Descend*. I would like to focus on the first problem here, i.e. the lack of narrative depth.

First of all, *We Descend* is built around no more than six or seven characters, mostly narrators. Another five or so are briefly mentioned in the text. This creates a claustrophobic atmosphere. Everybody has to meet everybody at some point. Second, there is so little imagination or inventiveness in the text it sometimes feels like you are reading a manual of some kind. Calling the convent 'Mountain House' for example. Characters are colourlessly named Historian, Scholar and Superius Frater.

Third, the brevity of the nodes sometimes makes the text sound superficial. "All my experience with the Conference, in addition to my native caution, tells me to wait. To present now could easily ruin my career" (/All this adds up). In two short sentences, in twenty-four words, the Scholar explains what is probably the most important decision in his life. Further, in three sentences: a description, a 'coup de foudre', and a vow. I have not clipped a word.

> The Historian was not a tall man, and he limped, but he was sturdily built, and had shaggy blond hair, deep blue eyes, and a rugged face. In short, he was beautiful, and I was instantly infatuated. He seemed to notice this, though the Good Doctor did not, and took what occasion he could to return my stare, at first with anger in his eyes, then a question, and finally a command: if I loved him, I must help him. I had no idea how, but I promised him with my eyes that I would. (/The Historian was not a)

Justification of motives is nearly non-existent. Egderus falls in love just because of blond hair and blue eyes?

It is written in the philosophy of early hypertext theory

For obvious reasons, authors like Landow and Joyce have at some point drawn a parallel between hypertext and postmodern literary criticism stemming from authors like Derrida and Barthes. It was an interesting parallel for sure, but an unrealistic one. Claiming that hypertext is a realisation of Derrida's *Grammatologie* is wishful thinking. There may be some similarity in the way both approach textuality, but the levels of abstraction of both theories are light-years removed. Anyhow, early hypertext writing has been profoundly influenced by literary theory. The idea that no stable meaning can be established and that words and text endlessly refer to themselves and other words/texts are translated to hypertext anchors and links. A word in a hypertext always receives part of its meaning through the way it is linked.

In *We Descend*, the obligatory reference to the slippery nature of meaning cannot be missed. However, within the work's detective novelish style where every word seems to have a clear meaning, its presence appears awkward and counterintuitive. "I must get away from here, from now, I must find and -- remember -- history, music, words that mean something, and say them. Like catastrophe. I seem to remember it as a musical term, back in the old days, before. Ah. Another word that still means something, or can be made to." According to the tree map, this is one of the ancients speaking. He wants to preserve the meaning of words and of history, which has been dominated by catastrophe. Apart from its unsavoury style this dramatic monologue introduces an interesting point about diachronical shifts of meaning and how they influence our view on the past and the present. Further down the same node however, another reference discourages even the broadest minded reader. "Before means in front of. But it also means prior to, anterior -- which also means in front of" (I must get away from).

You have a PC

We Descend was written on a Macintosh using eight different fonts. Although according to the instructions a number of adjustments were made for the Windows version (The fonts used in this), most differences between fonts are invisible on a PC. This makes it hard to distinguish between the different voices in the novel.

It is linear

In the instructions for the web extract of *We Descend* (Eastgate 2001), Bly distinguishes between text, path and structural links: the first inline, the second following the default path and the third for system links. Moreover, there are buttons to move through the time structure of the hypertext: Up for later, Down for earlier. Thus the hypertext is conceived as a multilinear structure with a three-dimensional time frame and the possibility of inline thematic or associative linking. However, in reality there is only one more or less successful way of reading We Descend and that is the default way, following the path links. Inline linking is hardly ever used and the time warp buttons induce confusion. In his 'Cybermountain Pre-paper' Bly writes "The reader can [should, jvl] elect to take a default path or "tour," which introduces the major characters and leads through the three principal 'bands' of time in which the story unfolds." At this point in the text Bly is still optimistic, he describes how the default path also "leaves sizeable tracts of temporal territory to be discovered on tours of the reader's own devising." In his 'directions for reading We Descend', he states that from the Title page "you can go to the Inventory, reread these directions, take the tour again by clicking 'just start,' or set off on your own by clicking the arrow buttons to see what happens." Further down the 'Cybermountain Pre-paper' he sounds more realistic however. "In the present stand-alone Storyspace version, once the reader leaves the default path, a rather cumbersome apparatus must be used for navigating the archive: the Inventory (shown below in Storyspace map view)." The truth is that when you leave the default track you are more lost than not.

It contains poetry

Most of *We Descend*, i.e. the larger part of Egderus's story is written in a prosaic style. When you follow the default path however, this main style and story is interwoven with extracts from manuscripts from the ancients and the remnant written in an abstract poetic style offering what could have been a welcome change to the plain rational narrative. Unfortunately, most of the poetry is pseudo-ontological melancholic dribble about the past. "What the kids never know, what they cannot know, is before. The past will never be in front of them, for them to look at, to see." Sentences like this have the musicality of a cow mooing Beethoven's ninth. "That's what's gone. They are walking, blind, into an empty picture frame. There's not even a frame." Before is what is gone? What felicitous phrases I see before me. And it gets worse. "I am being drawn, backwards, along with them, but backwards, looking at something, back there, where I was, before, where there's something to see" (Kids never know). This last hiccup of a sentence has neither rhythm nor sense.

This is a man's world, but it would be nothing...

I have not come across one female character in the entire novel: not even an oppressed one. The reason appears unclear. However, there are several gay phantasms, e.g. in the hospital. Aric, the sturdy soldier, asks Egderus, the feeble young boy, for a favour "when the lights go out." Egderus rejects and Aric, who has become the nice soldier by then, backs off immediately (/"I'm not happy about). Egderus has fallen in love with a blond blue-eyed Historian. Later, when he has grown up and lives at the Mountain House, he has his own private boy. This is the Historian speaking of the latter. "He's prettier than you, dear Egderus, but not as pretty as you were then... I loved you for saving me, of course, but had things been different, I would have loved you a better way."

The plot smells funny

If a plot should be a Swiss watch, *We Descend's* is Egyptian counterfeit. Many narrators and notes are not part of the plot. It is unclear in what way the Ancients or the Remnant are related to Egderus's story for example. Nonetheless, the reader is expected to read these sometimes ultimately tedious passages. Moreover, the plot itself is inconsistent and primitive. There appear to be living only a dozen people in We Descend-land, who keep bumping into one another. Illogical scenes continually undermine the flow of events, e.g. Gig's death which is neither used nor explained. It does not produce any interesting point of view or suspense. Or when Egderus leaves Mountain House to go work in the library for the Primus Frater. Egderus has meanwhile been attacked, he has been in bed for days, alone in the library for months, but only then (the camera is nearby) he starts putting together what happened to him. Finally, Aric will not tell Gig's story to anyone, not even to Robenc, with whom he has been working for years. However, he does recount it in its entirety to Egderus for the strangest reason: because he is bored.

It is crammed with clichés

Apart from its narrative gaps and inconsistencies the plot is entirely conventional: anti-hero is confronted with bad guy who wants him harm, concludes an alliance with other good guy, together they bring down bad guy. But also the more circumstantial elements have a high hollywoodian feel. The anti-hero is a feeble handicapped but intelligent young boy who will succeed despite great difficulties:

the American dream in person. The bad guy is brought in from outside by the authorities, probably a spy. The superior who takes the good guy under his protection is nice, old but weak. The protagonist is to continue his work. The monster is cleverly left unseen --only its actions are described-- keeping the door open for a rational explanation. Finally, many scenes produce a feeling of déjà vu. Egderus is eavesdropping on a conversation between Robenc and the Primus Frater. "At the sound of my beloved's name I jerked upright, knocking my head against a post. The two men must have heard me, for there was silence for a moment. Then I heard footsteps -- the Good Doctor was heading for the door!" (/At the sound of my). But Egderus manages to get out of the closet just in time and pretends to be tidying it. *We Descend* is full of this type of fill-up.

It lacks sense of time and temporality

It all happens in the distant future, *We Descend*'s documentation claims. However, neither the internal, nor the external time frame fits. Internally, Egderus's notes jump from 'small handicapped boy' to 'Superius Frater of Mountain House.' In-between there is a huge uncomfortable hiatus. Some gaps are filled using flashback and conversational allusion, but on the whole the time flow appears deficient. Note that I do not contend against the hyperfiction aesthetic. Narrative can be represented in hypertext; it can even offer an interesting new view on its cognitive mechanisms. However, whereas the hypertext layer is multilinear, associative, and sometimes incomplete, the narrative layer represents a convention and should therefore abide by different laws. Thus in hypertext--like in any other electronic medium-- narrative should be consistent and engaging.

Externally, as a reader it is difficult not to associate the convent, the fraters, the soldiers and the monster with the dark Middle Ages. The characters, however, approach their environment highly rationally, constantly trying to extract theories and find logical solutions. The cultural context is European. There are harsh winters, mountains, lakes. Characters are called Aric and Robenc, which sound like Scandinavian Germanic --perhaps even Viking -- names and there is some Latin influence through the church. All this makes me conclude that the story is set in something like Northern Europe. This does not fit the mentioning of slaves and Goliards however. Anyhow, the reference to a Science Fiction context does not retain the reader from building up an image of the world of *We Descend*. Its highly familiar nature is disturbed by inaccuracies, which in turn disrupt the image building process.

You care for your eyes

Imagine reading a novel in 10 pt Times New Roman on a 1280x1024 pixels radiation-spewing monster. There is no possibility to alter the font size. If I am blind before I am thirty…

It is too tedious to read it as a joke

There is humour in *We Descend*, but it may be doubted it was meant that way. The most ridiculous scene is probably when it is described how Gig used to chase the younger brothers with his axe when he was drunk. "Gig never entered the House, so if one could prevent Gig from ever getting between one and the House, one could usually escape without much trouble. But Gig was wily as well as mean, and would often surprise one out on a trail, and then a hair-raising chase would ensue. To my knowledge he never caught anyone, though some of the brothers injured themselves slightly in trying to get away from him" (/Only once did I see). An armed sentinel chasing a brother with an axe sounds at the same time funny and like a scene from a bad horror movie. The fact that the brothers succeed in getting away makes it even worse. Stating that the soldier does not enter the house without giving the reason makes the whole sound like a game of tag. Gig never catches anyone and still he is wily? Unfortunately, most scenes are not as funny as the above.

It is incoherent

There are clear inconsistencies in the storyline. For example, it should be kept a secret that the Great Golias is helping out the Historian, yet Robenc (his subordinate) is running round telling everyone that the Great Golias has ordered to release him. Another example is when Egderus is attacked by Gig. At first it is stated that he does not tell anyone. A few nodes later however, when it is more convenient for the storyline, he did tell Frater Anders without any explanation (/one day the superius).

You have read this review (you know it has a happy ending)

In <u>I descend into hypertext</u> a second volume of We Descend is announced to be underway. In the Cybermountain Pre-paper the author explains that he is presently stymied in his work on Volume Two, "which as [he] envision[s] it, will extend and at the same time enfold the first and current volume." In other words, the author is preparing a new (extended) version of *We Descend*. "At the Hypertext 97 Conference, I saw a demo of the zooming interface program Pad++, and immediately began to think of putting the piece into Pad's 2.5-dimensional architecture." I will not be reviewing it...