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Living for Hypertext: Interview with Deena Larsen

By Roberto Simanowski

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Abstract

Deena Larsen is an activist you will always find around: at Hypertext Conference, at Digital Art and Culture Conference, at CyberMountain, and in many chats and workshops on hypertext. Roberto Simanowski talked to her about writing, promoting, and selling hypertext, the 4 labyrinths, the reader can be lost, and about her more recent work *Disappearing Rain*, that mingles fiction with non fictional websites.

dd: How did you start writing hypertext and what does it mean to you?

DL: I started out wondering about ways to show connections without words. How could you show the secrets in a town where no one is willing to talk about them? How could you depict the secret longings of a Pastor's Wife for the life of a saloon girl? How could you show how the memories in a place get tangled up in time? Certainly not with a linear, page by page presentation. So I created a physical hypertext of an old west town. But physical presentations harbor a multitude of limitations. I transferred the thing to a computer, and crafted *Marble Springs* (using Hypercard, available from [Eastgate](#)).

Hypertext, more than anything else, means connections. It isn't the link, the portals from page to page, but the meaning, the connection, of the link, the WHY this word becomes a door, what is on the other side of the door, and why the two are related. This is a relationship without words.

Digital literature merges images and text and sound in the same way. It is the meaning behind the juxtaposition that can come through, and this is only been made possible through a computer.

dd: Hypertext is all about link and link is all about alternatives and free choice. What does this mean to you as reader and as author of hypertext?

DL: Hypertext *isn't* all about links any more than books are all about paper. Yes, the hypertext uses a link to show relationships, but there needs to be something there for these relationships. Hypertext is about using the technology in new and interesting ways to create meaning.

I read hypertexts for what they are saying—or trying to say—. As a reader, I don't like works that hide behind the technology and refuse to give me a story or paint a picture or intrigue my thoughts. We need to use the technology because it is the only —or the best— way to say something. Not because it is there.

dd: You have been writing hypertext for more than a dozen years now. Do you think this technology does to any extent affect the topic of what is written with it?

DL: I don't think it affects the topic as much as it affects how material is written. There are things that you can do in StorySpace, for example, that you can't do on the web (names of links, multiple links from one word, programmable links, levels of nodes). In *Samplers*, I took advantage of StorySpace to put shadow stories in the names of the links. I can't do that on the web, but in *Disappearing Rain*, I linked to other websites, drawing them into the work.

There are also wonderful, obsolete programs that can do many more things than the web—HyperCard allowed programming to such an extent that you could create virtual worlds—as I did in *Marble Springs*. *Myst* even used Hypercard to program the effects and keep track of the action. Ahh, we need to find ways NOT to lose the incredible programs and spaces in the rush to new technology.

Anyway, it's not topic as much as it is technique and how you tell the tale. I've read incredible stories on paper and rotten stories on paper. Likewise, I've read great stuff and horrible stuff on disk and in Storyspace and on the web.

dd: You have published your works with Eastgate Systems, which now sells it on diskettes. Does this form of trade pay the rent? What future lies in the net where, as Stephan King has shown us, one can publish and earn independently from publisher houses?

DL: Well, first off, does writing really pay the rent? The median income for a linear writer is \$5,000 a year—and that includes Stephen King's income. So... no, writing does not pay the rent. We are still working on business models—what works for an author who sells millions does not work for a poet who sells hundreds. We need to find ways to write and get groceries at the same time—quite a challenge.

dd: Mark Bernstein's keynote at Hypertext Conference 1999 was entitled "Where Are The Hypertexts?" He then presented quite a lot of hypertexts including the precursors in the realm of book. However, the more important and more problematic question remains: Where are the readers of hypertext?

DL: Well, this is sort of a trick question, along the lines of "where are the believers?" Believers in what, we have to ask first of all. If by readers we mean where are the critical academic folks who are reading this for a class, for a thesis, for further expanding our lit crit, they are alive and well in the worldwide academia. More and more universities are teaching digital literature, more and more students are discovering it. If by readers we mean where are the digital literati, the avant garde experimentors, they are on the web using Shockwave 8 files and having fun. Too many --far too many-- sites to keep track of are popping up for digital arts and literature.

If however, we mean, where are the readers who would pick up these books for fun and while away an evening sitting by the firelight of their computer reading a digital work of literature, then I would have to say that I don't see them on the scene yet. I don't know of any hypertext readers groups that meet regularly but I know of so many readers groups that meet to discuss other works of literature. (Please let me know if you know of any --again, I could be way out of the loop.)

Where are these guys? We are tracking phantoms here, and I don't know if I would recognize this mythic reader or not. (I have had some emails with "just regular folk" looking for hypertext, have referred them to [253](#), [Lies](#), [Same Day Test](#), [Ferris Wheels](#) and other "comfortable, easy introductions," and have had them correspond with me, looking for more and talking about the works. So these folks do exist, it's just that I don't see them in the grocery store purusing the latest from the *Iowa Review Web*.

There are many labyrinths in which these people could be lost:

1. Lost in access

Many of these readers have busy lives and can't be playing on the web looking for underground URLs. Their fireplaces and bathtubs are very comfortable--what do we offer to entice them to sit at a screen to read? How are they finding out about what we offer? They aren't.

We need to publicize digital literature and explain what it is and why it is worthwhile. Organizations like the [Electronic Literature Organization](#) and [trAce](#) are reaching out to writers and readers, exploring this new medium. We need to do a lot more outreach.

We need to bring access to these folks. The epub movement, which has exploded at a rate a wee bit faster than the first internet explosion, will surely help us there. They are developing electronic readers you can carry and read easily, new business models for downloading works for lower prices than for physical media, drumming up business for reading on screen. The digital literature community needs to sit up, take notice, and join in.

2. Lost in expectations

A long time ago, we thought we had the "lost in hyperspace" problem licked. Readers weren't getting lost, says our usability testing. They are finding the information they need, thank you very much.

Yet the anecdotal evidence I have is that readers are still having trouble dealing with expectations such as "Where's the plot? Where are the characters?" (Two recent ELO chats mentioned this: May 13 [Teaching HT](#) and Aug 19 [Digital storytelling on the web](#)).

I have not heard of or seen papers on lost in expectations--or usability testing for enjoying a hyperfiction. I am not really in the loop, so if these papers are out there, please let me know.

3. Lost in complexity

Many of the digital works we have now are masters of complexity. The story (and people in the story) break up, apart, under, down, and over without warning. Dedicated readers spend years figuring out one story. Well, imagine a world where we have Kafka's full span of works, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Pynchon's *V*, Kerouac on some good drugs with fancy equipment, a couple of dime novels, and some grad student work in cinema --and that's IT. Now, we take a few people from the grocery store, sit them down with these works, and expect them to have fun, make sense of the works --and buy more like them. Let me tell you, it won't happen. We have yet to have the thrilling storytellers, the romance, the escape that you can get in paper. We have yet to tell the story simply.

This may be the nature of the beast. As Michael Joyce said "There is no simple way to say this." If there were, believe me, we would all be writing with paper. (Paper is cheaper and faster, you don't have to explain it to anyone, it's dead easy to program, and it doesn't crash losing your entire work without backups the day before a major presentation).

This may be because literature needs time --we didn't get Shakespeare the decade after the printing press was invented.

This may be because many of the hypertext writers are interested in literary theory and are writing to prove/disprove/reprove points from theorists--which makes life complicated.

This may also be because we are so infatuated with the possibilities--FINALLY a way to say what I want to say how I want to say it --that we get swept up in the complexities and don't remember the average, grocery store reader. I try to think about all levels of readers in my works --from the person opening that first hypertext and wondering how to use the mouse to the most sophisticated reader searching for hidden ahas! For example, you can just put the Samplers disk in the computer,

click twice to load, and then hit return (and continue to hit return) for a nice, simple reading. Or you can explore the names of the links for a shadowed, more detailed and sinister reading. Or you can search for hidden spaces in the bowels of the program.

4. Lost in schooling

If you are over 35, then you didn't grow up with computers and were introduced when your ways of thinking and gathering information and reading were set. We learned character, plot, setting, and a strict form of reader comprehension--and expect that now in our reading.

The Internet/digital literature is going through the same generational split as the automobile, where many who grew up without it refused to join in, were timid, created laws against it, etc. (Others in the generation were enthusiasts--I'm not saying that it is a function of age but an excuse of age). Younger folks who grew up with the automobile jumped right in their tin lizzies, honked their horns, and voila. Younger folks who grew up with the computer don't have the same excuses for fears and have more expectations for reading and finding information by clicking through rather than by turning pages.

dd: You run the *Hypertext Writers' Workshop* on the last four Hypertext-Conferences and invented the CyberMountain- and Cybercity-Meetings to promote and improve hyperliteracy and quality hypertext writing. Could you tell us more, please, about these events? How do they work, and do they succeed?

DL: Why are there MFA programs, writer retreats, writer workshops, writer conferences, writer support groups, etc. everywhere? What is it about writing that we need to make it a community task rather than a solitary exercise? I think it is that we need to find a way to explore new ideas, get fresh perspectives, react to other people's works, and get reactions to our own.

All of the events that I have organized (and am organizing) are designed to help bring digital writers together in the same way that paper writers get together. They succeed in many ways: we hone works, we spark ideas, we write papers (both about the works and about working with programmers to develop works), we start projects and organizations (the Electronic Literature Organization started at CyberMountain), and we lay the foundation for future collaboration.

I am currently planning/doing:

CyberFlats in Denmark August 20-24, 2001. This will bring 10 writers and 10 programmers together to create tools for writing and working with literature and beyond. *O.W.E.L.* an ELO-sponsored online workshop, where we will look at two or three works a month and meet in Lingua Moo on the fourth Saturday of each month to discuss these works. CyberDAC --a piggyback workshop before the Digital Arts

and Culture which will bring writers and readers together. And of course, the fifth *Hypertext Writers Workshop* in conjunction with [HT01](#).

Also, *ELO* and *trAce* sponsor chats every Sunday for creative writers and readers to discuss the exciting innovations and possibilities in hypertext and other forms of electronic literature. I host the program chats on the first and third Sundays, which feature special guests from among the leading lights on the electronic literature world. The schedule for upcoming chats and archives of previous chats is at: <http://www.eliterature.org/com/index.shtml>.

At all of these events, we welcome writers, readers, programmers, and anyone interested in Digital Literature, share works and perspectives, and generally revel in the possibilities of digital literature.

dd: In your recent stories "[Disappearing Rain](#)" the college freshman Anna has disappeared and has to be found. One of the "clues" is an online diary with a list of actual URLs that point to Anna's interests and suggest how she might have disappeared. That way the story not only winds up online somewhere, but you make real websites, e.g. companies, institutions, into figures in your detective story without their knowing.

DL: I don't know how much I want to say without giving away the plot (or some of the pivotal plots) in *Disappearing Rain*, but as the characters determine where Anna has disappeared, they become more and more engaged with the web. Sophie, the grandmother, finds ways to intimidate credit card companies and their conspirators through webcams and other unorthodox methods of communicating over the web. Anna, Amy's twin sister, reconfigures the web to join up with Anna. Throughout these discoveries, readers can link to real world pages (ranging from Yahoo people search to home pictures of the Yang-tse River on a GeoCities page).

I integrated the fictional, surrealistic world of *Disappearing Rain* and the "real world" of the internet web sites through links to relevant web sites. The work thus functions somewhat like a live action game –you don't really believe that the Sheraton hotel is Dracula's castle, but you are really running through the lobby and tipping the bellman for clues. Readers (I hope) won't (and haven't yet) gone to the webcam at 9th and Pearl and waited for [Sophie's messages](#)

Disappearing Rain is meant as a transitory work, an ephemeral comment on the ephemeral nature of the net. As more and more of the real world links turn to 404 errors, we lose sight more and more of Anna. As Amy says, the site is going to move tonight or tomorrow, so act now.

On a technical/legal note, I wrote this during the scare last year when the U.S. Court of Appeals upheld an argument that sites were responsible for the content of pages

that they linked to --and for a while there, sites were going to be responsible for what sites linked to them. As the net is in such a state of flux, I figured that I would provide a snapshot of the web at the turn of the millenium. This meant notifying over 200 websites that I was linking to their pages. I got some interesting mail back and posted it on the site as well.

dd: This is a striking concept of mixing fiction with reality. Is "Fictional Reality" the future of "Virtual Reality"?

DL: Gosh, I hope not. I hope we can have a thousand and one (or an infinity and one) ways of playing with reality.

dd: And how exactly does "Disappearing Rain" work?

DL: Disappearing Rain, an integrated web fiction, functions on many levels. On the surface, it is a mystery asking the reader to join in the family's search for Anna. As we search for Anna, we find more traces of her family's history and connections with the web.

The exoskeleton of the hypertext's multilayered structure shows through as a series of "kanjikus" --haikus written on the top of Japanese characters. Each of the kanjikus is thematically related --so each forms a "chapter" in the hypertext. Each word of these kanjikus forms the title of a node, thus showing the structural relationships between the plots and characters. The work presents a choice of navigation--either to become immersed in the story and follow thematic connections, to explore the kanjikus to see the structural connections, or to go "forwards" and "backwards" on a default story line.

dd: How do you see the present and future of the American and international of hypertext or digital literature scene?

DL: This is the brightest of futures, this is the darkest of futures. I think that digital literature is barely ready for swaddling clothes compared to what is going to take place in terms of technology, collaboration, merging with art/sound/text/ and more. I also think that digital literature may be ready for burial shrouds if we cannot find a way to work with and entice readers and interactors in the media. No matter what, there will always be people who want to play along the edges of these new toys. The question is, what will the results of the play be and who will watch it?

dd: We will watch it. Thank's a lot for the interview.