

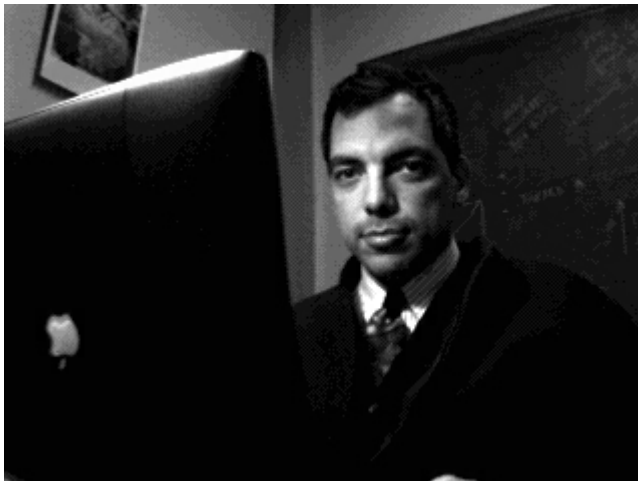
Hypertext-Conference: Costs, Advantages, and Alternatives – an Interview with Francisco Ricardo, chair of the Publicity Committee

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No. 5 – 20.10.1999

Abstract

Francisco Ricardo holds a Master's in Education with a concentration in Interactive Technology from Harvard University, a Certificate of Advanced Studies from Harvard, and a Ph.D. in Humanities Computing from Boston University. He lectures, consults, and develops software to enhance human communication, both in educational and corporate contexts. He is in the chair of the Publicity Committee of the HT Conference 2000 and wrote an open letter to the community to start a questioning process regarding conference fee, participants, and subjects. Roberto Simanowski talked with Francisco about this conference, about the Conference of Digital Arts and Culture, as "the future of our field", and about differences between American and German digital literature.



dd: Francisco, the HT Conference, annually held since 1988, deals with technical but also philosophical, and aesthetical aspects of hypertext. How many participants are scholars of computer science, and how many of the humanities?

FR: The mix varies, but generally, the proportion is overwhelmingly computer-science oriented. In Hypertext '99, 31 papers were presented. Of these, 27 focused on the science of hypertext, that is methods of organization, description of software, methodologies, and systems; 1 paper treated research problems in the field, such as unifying hypermedia and the World Wide Web; and 3 based on hyperreading, which is the rhetoric of hypertext. There were 8 associate papers chairs, which are the folks who manage the interface between the authors who submitted papers to the conference and the reviewers who evaluated them. Of these 8 people, 2 came from a writing background; the other 6 were computer scientists.

dd: What are the reasons for such a big gap?

FR: ACM - the Association for Computing Machinery - is the base sponsor of the Hypertext conferences. As the name implies, the ACM is a computer science organization; it is not focused on problems of education, authoring, or style, except as they revolve around a larger computational or software engineering problem. Consequently, many humanities scholars don't even know about the Hypertext conferences. As I mention so often, cost is also a factor; these are not cheap compared to humanities conferences, primarily because engineers are better funded than humanists.

dd: What are the costs?

FR: \$475 for ACM members, \$565 for non-ACM members, \$175 for students if received in advance. For details look up the website of [HYPERTEXT'98 costs](#).

The cost may not be out of line, but it is beyond that of virtually all humanities conferences. The benefit is that, unlike humanities conferences, one really gets a truly inside look at how hypertext is actually developed, and the kinds of problems that confront engineers are important for humanists to know because they can better understand and exploit the limitations of the medium. I consider it important for humanists because current protocols like the WWW seem to be running out of creative flexibility for authors, and some have already begun programming their own systems from scratch using programming languages like Java or authoring environments like Macromedia Director. So I see the advanced hyper-author of the future as being very much involved in the engineering of systems, and there will be little difference between "hypertexts" and "systems" as such. Anyone who has ever used HTML to create a hyperstory knows how quickly one encounters frustrating limitations.

dd: So, you mean, the hyperfiction-authors as well as the hyperfiction-theorists have to improve their computer skills in order to learn and enhance the language they are dealing with?

FR: Exactly: It is no different than the painter whose understanding of theme, lighting, and composition are not enough; he still must understand the mechanics of his medium, including types of canvas, paint, mixtures, varnishes, and preservation techniques that are very much in the mechanics of his medium. And it is the equal ability with both the medium and the message that enables a Vermeer, a Picasso, or a Monet. The analogy is true for all the arts. In music, consider Debussy or Stravinsky. In these cases, it was even impossible to realize a thematic work (e.g., *La Mer*, or *The Firebird Suite*) without a mastery of the underlying mechanics, including timbre and orchestration. The moral we can take away from the work of these geniuses is that a good idea is just that: a good idea. Its execution is not something we should take for granted, but on the contrary, what makes a good idea into a great idea is that the way in which it is implemented pushes the boundaries and limits of the medium in which it is to be realized. In that sense, it is a total creation, a totally innovative revolution both conceptually and mechanically. That is where I'm going and where the future lies.

dd: Lets come back to the HT Conference. Are there any prospects to bridge the gap between computer-science and philosophically oriented participants? Or should the humanities rather establish their own conference, provided they get the funds to do so?

FR: The best way to find out is at the individual level. Every person/writer/artist/theorist should initially and always understand the importance of SEEING what is being said and done. In the case of Hypertext 2000, that is why I am aiming to increase the participation of humanists in the conference. We need people to come and enter the dialogue, and contribute their own research experiences and use the conference for its ideas and work related to hypertext. The conference is the foremost hypertext conference in the world, but minimally. Some people, like Deena Larsen, put in extraordinary efforts every year to get hypertext and writing/reading to come together, but in each conference there is one or two new and unique voices that literally comes out of nowhere and electrifies the attendees. Last year, it was Jill Walker at the University of Bergen in Norway, and Alexander Mehler at the University of Trier and Anja Rau, who will make brilliant contributions in this field.

dd: The conference takes place either in an European or in an American city. What about the national gap? Is there an 'national take over'?

FR: The most consistent consideration is in the tone of the papers: each paper is either very scientific or very philosophical/rhetorical. The cultural divide is not over geographical boundaries, but over differences in discipline. Writers and philosophers have a grand view that lacks details and computer scientists are the

opposite. You can imagine how interesting this synthesis becomes in a single conference when, as happened last year, we have panels on hypertext writing or the philosophy of hypertext being attended by computer scientists who are not familiar with the work of the great modern thinkers or even the classics in literature. It is inspiring for both sides to learn about each other.

dd: O.k, lets talk about the gap regarding examples under discussion? There are not only English written hypertexts in world. In Germany, for example, the first competition in internet-literature took place in 1996, and since then the community of authors and friends of digital literature has been quite active. Have you ever heard something about a German or French hypertext at an HT-conference?

FR: Yes, well, this is an excellent point. I was referring to style and tone, but the actual data is even more important. The problem we have is that there is not a sufficiently large number of literary hypertext articles submitted. At other conferences, the sample of work is much more international in character. I am thinking especially of Digital Arts and Culture, which is also annual (and this year will take place in Atlanta, Georgia Oct. 28-30, 1999. DAC '99 is different from the ground up because it is not scientific in nature, and can therefore incorporate an international field of artists, new media practitioners, scientists, theorists, and members of digital industry. This year's DAC conference will feature more than 100 speakers, performers, and artists, from over a dozen countries, and keynote speakers and performers will include Robert Coover, Elliott Peter Earls, N. Katherine Hayles, and Michael Joyce.

And here is the important balance. The HYPERTEXT conferences (12 so far) are the best known and best attended, and have a history that is absolutely crucial for anyone interested in the field. DAC is only on its second conference, so it is just getting started. Rather than starting from a scientific position, the DAC conferences are completely multidisciplinary and mix several presentation formats: scholarly papers, live and mediated artistic performances and readings, and gallery installations. The fact that many of the conference presentations will be delayed-webcast over the Internet (and several lectures and performances will be webcast live) is an added bonus: a case of the medium and the message being one and the same.

dd: What is your advice to a young scholar (say from a 'poor' department of humanities) who would like to take part in this conference and to share his/her thoughts and theory on hypertext?

FR: The first mandate of every scholar applies here too: one must read, write, and participate. And one must do this as much as possible, without fear of alienation from departments or advisors. Anyone involved in hypertext will soon find out how little other people understand of his or her work. But that is only temporary; the entire world is going hypertext in one form or another. Soon there will be hypertext interfaces in portable phones. It will be a way of life. Therefore, someone interested

in the field should really know something about the medium from the reader's, the critic's, and the creator's perspective, too, so that one is not stuck in a removed analytical position. There is a tremendous need for the creation of tools for creating content, and for theory on styles of authoring and what exactly happens in interactive digital communication.

Let me take another pass at this question: the entire field of hypertext is involved in some way with that of digital creation. Hypertext is one of the only fields which can belong exclusively to the computer medium (interactive visualization, for instance, is another). Because of this, all hypertext relates to one or another dimension of human creativity. This is precisely why it is so rich and hard to contain. But one doesn't have to stay only in hypertext in order to explore the richness of human creativity in this digital medium. Interactive animation is a perfect example of digital creativity without hypertext, and the best work in this area that I can think of is that of John Maeda at the MIT Media Lab, whose projects include all kinds of interesting transformations along acoustic, visualization, typographic, and other forms of digital data representation. Eventually, because of Maeda's work and the work I see in the DAC conferences, hypertext will become only one (though still central) ingredient in digital art and communication.

dd: I am sure it already is considered the approach of Germans to digital art and communication. Whereas the winners of the New York University Press Prize of hypertext are word-only hypertexts, the winners of German competitions of digital literature (as Pegasus in 1998 or the Ettlinger competition for Internet-Literature) employ, besides words, other media like images and even sound, or focus on interactivity as a crucial aspect of digital communication. Is there hesitation on the part of American hyperfiction-writers to take a further step to an aesthetics of intermediality and interactivity, that, as I think, the net is forcing us to do?

FR: The production of hypertexts is not the same as the production of hypermedia. A hypertext is typically an individual effort carried out by a lone writer. A hypermedia piece, on the other hand, involves a graphic artist, one or more writers, animators, sound people, etc. There are many roles, and the finished product is more of a group effort. It is therefore about digital creation, not just writing. American hypertext authors are, like Michael Joyce, people who have extended their traditional print publication voices into the new medium, and the difference shows in the size of the sites. Hypermedia sites, which are much more labor intensive, are smaller in size; usually fewer than 200 links. Hyperfiction works on the other hand are multiples of this size. Of course, a text lexia that may consist of 2 paragraphs, for instance, is easier to create than a hypermedia lexia that may have required text, graphics, and considerations of placement. In the sense meant by Barthes, hypertexts are writerly works, requiring more from the reader for their completion; and hypermedia works are readerly texts in that the position of the reader is one of less active involvement in the interpretation of the work.

dd: Back to the text: What is your philosophy of hypertext?

FR: There is a tendency to see hypertext as something that divides a text. Naturally, this creates confusion because we can always ask, "Why would dividing a text into linked pieces give you more than whatever meaning or content the whole text possessed originally?" I consider this view to be a subtractive understanding of hypertext, knowing what hypertext is by breaking down a text into lexias, and it is not the best model for understanding the full measure of hypertext's potential. Let us contrast this with an additive view: hypertext as a means not to divide one text, but to interconnect large numbers of texts. This was suggested by Ted Nelson's concept of the "docuverse" and is, for instance, the aim of the World Wide Web. It makes the value of hypertext much clearer: it is not just a table of contents for a book, but also a catalog of holdings for a massive library. Seen in this way, we can then envision the tools that would help in this aim: systems for categorizing texts, methods for building and expanding links, and techniques and tools for searching in multiple dimensions. Without hypertext at the level of large numbers of documents, we must rely on classification systems, librarians, and a lot of luck, if we want to find something of interest in this space.

dd: You conclude your open letter to the hypertext community with the appeal to start a questioning process in order to bring the humanistic side of hypertext into the full light of the ACM Hypertext conference. Is there a specific way to achieve that? What, for instance, could the German netliterature-partisans do, if unable to attend the conference?

FR: We need a central venue for identifying the work and interests of people whose interests touch hypertext in any way. And the WWW is both the best and the worst thing to ever happen to hypertext: on one hand, since it uses hyperlinks, it made hypertext known to the entire industrialized world. But on the other hand, the quality of the links in current browser implementations is extremely poor (for example, there is no information about where links lead, and one must therefore do much more traveling back and forth than necessary in order to find the lexias that are most relevant). Still, since the WWW is still the only realistic way to set up social dialogue across distances, all persons interested in hypertext are in desperate need of a centrally sustainable web site treating literary hypertext. I would encourage an online magazine such as this one to implement a discussion list, so that the flow of communication can be fully looped. The need is definitely there for such a project.

dd: Well, the discussion list is set up. We will see how it works. For now, thank you for the interview and good luck with HT 2000.