

Creating, selling, and evaluating Hyperfiction. An Interview with Mark Bernstein

By Roberto Simanowski

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We do not know whether Mark Bernstein should be considered the Gutenberg of hypertext. But we have no doubt that he is a most important figure in this field as both a theorist and publisher of hypertext. His company Eastgate Systems (founded in 1982) -- the "primary source for serious hypertext" (Robert Coover) -- not only sells offline hypertexts and hyperfiction on disk or CD Rom, but it also creates hypertext technologies (as Storyspace). Moreover, it announces events, books, and courses related to hypertext and is an important source for hypertext theory and links to online magazines, writers, and reviews. Without the platform provided by Eastgate, the hypertext community would not exist as it does.



Mark Bernstein has organised and participated in HT conferences since they began in 1987. He has presented both CD-Roms and articles about hypertext to these conferences, and anyone who heard and saw his keynote address at the 99 HT Conference knows how entertaining his presentation can be. Roberto Simanowski talked with Mark about hypertext's present and future, and about the task of evaluation and publishing of hypertext.

dd: It has been a dozen years now since your company Eastgate Systems released Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*. This hyperfiction is canonical today, yet, most people still haven't heard about it. I met a Web designer who deals with hypertext and usability all the time, but who didn't know that there is also fiction based on hypertext structure. In your keynote speech "Where are the Hypertexts?" at the 99 HT Conference in Darmstadt, you provided convincing answers. Let's put it this way: "Where is the hypertext audience?"

MB: While it is true that many well educated people have not read, or heard of, *Afternoon* or other widely-known hypertexts, this should not surprise us: most serious writing today is received by audiences of modest size.

We need to always remember the shape and size of the literary world, its limitations as well as its strengths. Many of today's finest writers reach a fairly limited audience. Gass, Coover, and DeLillo, for example, are often cited as among the greatest living American authors, yet their audience is very small in comparison to, say, the World Cup finals.

There is always too much to read, and never enough time. Our tastes – even our tastes for explicitly literary fiction – are incredibly diverse. I think there's probably no living writer who has inherited the position that Hemingway (for example) once occupied – no active writer whose work you can really expect every serious reader to know. *No* writer is canonical in that sense, so it's a mistake to expect any hypertext to be.

On the other hand, hypertexts like *Afternoon* and *Victory Garden* and *Patchwork Girl* and *Samplers* are widely read and widely discussed. They're taught at colleges and universities all over the world. They're beginning to make their way into secondary schools as well – especially outside the US, where the current American fad for prudery is less problematic for teachers.

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dd: Laura Miller, senior editor of the online magazine "Salon" declared in March 1999 in an article about hypertext: "Hypertext is sometimes said to mimic real life, with its myriad opportunities and surprising outcomes, but I already have a life, thank you very much, and it is hard enough putting that in order without the chore of organizing someone else's novel." How would you have liked to respond to this?

MB: Miller isn't interested in hypertext and doesn't seem to know much about it. She was interested in distancing herself from some ideas about print fiction that she doesn't enjoy, and hypertext was a convenient rhetorical device, an extreme example. Miller wants clarity and plot, in the same way that some concertgoers want a melody you can hum: Miller thinks hypertext is bad, and the people who want to hum don't like Tchaikovsky much or Schönberg at all.

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dd: In your paper at the 98 HT Conference you investigated Patterns Of Hypertext and pointed out that "by developing a richer vocabulary of hypertext structure, and basing that vocabulary on structures observed in actual hypertexts, we can move toward a richer and more effective hypertext criticism, one that can move beyond the presentation-centered rhetoric so prevalent in current discussions of the Web." Such a rich and effective hypertext criticism is urgently needed, at least when a jury (as in the case of the German competition for literature in the Internet, Pegasus, and the New York University Press Prize for Hyperfiction) has to make their decision, and justify it with more than an unanimous vote. What do you think of an academic approach to hyperfiction? What are the categories to be taken into account when establishing an aesthetics of hyperfiction?

MB: "Patterns of Hypertext" is meant to address exactly this question. If we are to understand hypertext's aesthetics, we need to read hypertext, and we need to be able to talk about the hypertexts we've read. Doing the work -- reading hypertexts carefully -- is vital. But it's also important to think about *how* hypertexts achieve an effect, how they work and how we perceive them. Giving things names helps us avoid an endless thicket of confusion.

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dd: The author of a hyperfiction is not only the person whose name is above the text. One has to consider the system builders as well, who gives the author the means to express herself.

MB: I think that's the wrong way to look at the question. What you say is undoubtedly true, just as bookmakers, printers, book designers, and font cutters, binders, and illustrators all shaped the print literature of, say, the 18th century. But we've come to agree that the crucial thing about a book is its text, that the authors' voice is the essence and the rest plays a secondary role.

dd: I agree, extra-textual considerations have always been important. Nevertheless, I think there is a difference, since book designers determine what the text looks like but not how many letters the alphabet consists of. System builders create the language digital literature is written with (needless to say, this language consists of words, images, sound, animation ...). You might recall that in the 99 HT conference workshop "Messenger Morphs the Media", Deena Larsen and other hyperfiction writers demanded that system builders develop the means writers need to bring their ideas into the digital world. For example, if you were not able to insert 360-degree QuickTime movies as imagemap into a hypertext--as Moulthrop does in The Tomb Robbers -- the/his digital alphabet would have been missing a letter. Isn't this more than just shaping text after it has been written?

MB: Yes, and no. You're right in pointing out that system designers have lots of influence, and that influence is especially visible right now because everything is new. But publishers, book designers, and book sellers have always played a great role in making meaning, in creating writing. The role is always easiest to see when structures are changing -- for example, in 17th century publishing, when the roles of the printer, the publisher, and the author were still changing rather rapidly. The idea that the author is a specific person, and that the name on the title page is actually the name of that individual, was still a new idea then -- indeed, medieval custom held that authors should ascribe their work to an intellectual patron instead of claiming credit themselves.

dd: What do you think of this kind of 'collaborative writing' between author and system builder?

MB: It's not new. The collaboration between writer and editor is far more significant, even in print.

dd: What effect will 'traditional' collaborative writing, as can be found in many projects on the net, have on the role of editor?

MB: I don't know. I'm skeptical of collaboration; often the best writing is done alone. But there is a place for new forms and new voices, and it's always dangerous to say that something won't work well simply because it hasn't worked well yet.

dd: Does the modern poet have to be an engineer at the same time?

MB: The division is false, and dangerous. We've created an illusion that the two cultures are separate and ought to be separate. That's wrong. The artist (and the reader) need anything and everything to say what must be said. A poet or a philosopher may need to know anything. The same holds true for an engineer.

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dd: Literature online avoids the traditional financial constraints and institutional control of publishers. It frees the author. Can this advantage for the author be a disadvantage for the reader? What possibilities do you see for free publishing linked with some aesthetic evaluation?

MB: Nonsense! Electronic literature faces many of the same constraints. "Free publishing" is an illusion that leads to a literary desert, empty shelves populated by a few state-sanctioned Artists and by advertising.

The work of publishers and booksellers is, in the end, the task of matching writers and readers. The world is filled with fine writing, and the world is filled with readers whose needs and desires are complex and ever-changing. Out of this confusion, it's possible to grab one reader and one writer and to make a match -- to reach out and give someone exactly the writing they need. That's the goal of the book trade: a

writer changes someone's life, and the beneficiary helps the writer buy some groceries.

Yes, it's better to avoid cutting down trees, chopping them up, and shipping chopped trees all over the world. But don't imagine that getting rid of wood pulp eliminates the need for the publishers and booksellers, or makes their task simple or cheap. It requires skill and taste, judgement, and above all it requires a way to reach millions of people -- people who might need one of your books *today*. That's what people in the book trade do, and that's what we try to do at Eastgate.

Some people suppose that you could just let every writer post their work on a free Web page, and then readers could wander around and pick up whatever they want. This is merely an attempt to remove one tiny industry from the capitalist economy -- to say, "we're happy with capitalism, but writers will pretend that we're all socialists." It's a sucker game for writers; it leaves them utterly dependent on the whatever wealthy patron will donate some table scraps this week. Uncommercial literature is what Europe had in the dark ages -- literature meant to make the local thugs happy.

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dd: What do you think hyperfiction will look like in 10 years?

MB: I've stopped guessing. Ten years ago, I never expected short hypertexts to be of any real interest at all. Today, we have all sorts of wonderfully polished little hypertexts -- *Lust* and *I Have Said Nothing* and *Samplers* and *Kokura*. Who knows what we'll see next?

Technologically, a lot of people think immersive video is the future. I think that's unlikely: it's much easier to tell stories in text than in film, and there are lots of things you can say that don't make a movie. There *will* be more video, of course, as John Straczynski's idea of desktop television becomes feasible. But I don't think video (or visual art) will displace words.

(We may, though, see some interesting hybrid work -- a revival of illuminated manuscripts, perhaps.)

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dd: If you could leave only one text to the world, would it be a hypertext or a printed book?

MB: A hypertext, of course -- if I'm not around, I'd much rather have a chance to convince people through Hypertext's dialogue than to rely on being able to bowl them over through Print's sermon.

dd: Thank you very much for the interview.