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Extended Abstract of: *The End of Books – or Books without End?* (University of Michigan Press, 2000) –

By J. Yellowlees Douglas

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Of all developments surrounding hypermedia, none has been as hotly or frequently debated as the meeting of storytelling and interactivity. The earliest critical articles on the possibilities for interactive fiction predated any actual examples, and, today, editorials, articles, and critical analyses dedicated to the subject continue to outnumber the fairly modest number of examples of interactive fiction that currently exist. *The End of Books or Books Without End?* examines the debate swirling around the marriage of fiction and digital technology: Does an interactive story demand too much from its readers? Does the whole concept of readerly choice destroy the integrity of an author's vision? Does interactivity turn reading fiction from "play" into "work"; too much work? Will hypertext fiction overtake the novel as a form of art or entertainment? And what might future interactive books look like?

The End of Books guides readers through the most prominent criticism on interactive fiction from both its proponents and skeptics and examines similarities and differences between print and hypertext fiction. At its core, *The End of Books* contains a series of readings of critically acclaimed interactive works that illuminates how hypertext fiction "works," and how the medium can shed new light on models of the reading process. While Douglas cautions readers against generalizing about future genres and works from an examination of this still-evolving technology and medium, she identifies possible developments for the future of storytelling from outstanding examples of Web-based fiction and CD-ROM narratives, possibilities that will enable narratives to both portray the world with greater realism and to transcend the boundaries of novels and films, character and plot alike.

Beginning with a careful analysis of the criticism on interactive fiction, *The End of Books* examines many popular misconceptions about the new medium, from Sven Birkert's *Gutenberg Elegies* to Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, against prominent examples of interactive narratives that include *Afternoon*, *Myst* and Douglas Adams' *Starship Titanic*. A noted theorist of interactive fiction, Douglas' *The End of Books* continues the investigation of theories of reading, poetics,

aesthetics and their relevance to the experience of interactive fiction she has pursued in over dozen articles on the subject that remain the only examples of research on reading and interactivity. Using critically acclaimed disk-based hypertext fiction, Web-based short stories, and digital narratives on CD-ROM, this book explores the relevance and accuracy of theories of reading based primarily on highly conventional print texts where hypertext fiction, avant-garde print fiction and even highly conventional texts are concerned. Douglas ultimately uses close readings of works like Michael Joyce's *Twelve Blue* and Jordan Mechner's *The Last Express* to consider the aesthetic possibilities of new digital technologies for producing works of fiction that can prove more realistic, richer, and more inexhaustible than anything possible in print or on film.