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# Operations of writing: Interview with Stuart Moulthrop

By Roberto Simanowski

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## Abstract

Stuart Moulthrop is well known as both author and theorist of hyperfiction. He is the author of several articles on hypertext, contemporary fiction, and digital culture. Moulthrop is Editor Emeritus of Postmodern Culture, Director of Electronic Literature Organization, he teaches at University of Baltimore in 1994. Roberto Simanowski talked to him about his work, about *space* in hypertext, the author's replacement by the designer, the 'perils' of multimedia, "reviewing agencies" on the net and the future of new media.

**dd:** Stuart, you are well known as both author and theorist of hyperfiction. Your hyper-novel *Victory Garden* (1991) is as canonical as Michael Joyce's *Afternoon. A Story* in the realm of this new literary field. What is this novel about and why did you choose hypertext to tell it?

**SM:** *Victory Garden* concerns various fronts of the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, but chiefly those located within the U.S., particularly a certain imaginary sunbelt state called Tara. Hypertext seemed the right choice—indeed the only choice—to capture the bewildering complexity of such a massively convoluted, hyper-mediated experience. Or to put it another way: I was reeling my way through 1990 trying to make some sense of the previous decade, when suddenly George Bush pere declared war, first on Iraq, then somewhat incongruously, on me. I refer to the cultural war that accompanied the bombing and shooting... the other war of the other Gulf that is still smoldering in contemporary America. *Victory Garden* was my own sort of declaration, not of war or (I hope) surrender, but of principles.

**dd:** When Robert Coover introduced *Victory Garden* on the front page of *New York Times Book Review* (29. 8. 1993, *Hyperfiction: Novels for the Computer*) to readers who mostly are not used to click and decide the proceeding of a story, he was rhetorically asking: "what's so great about "interactivity" anyway? What's wrong with surrendering deferentially to the implacable linear flow of an author's creative

thought, her own particular page-by-page artistic and narrative decisions?" Let's pick up the question. What's so great about the one, what's wrong with the other?

**SM:** I have nothing against sequentiality, or indeed against traditional forms of literature. Grateful as I am for that terrific review, I regret the way it has tended to stick some of us into a binary (or bipolar) opposition. As if there is some kind of exclusive choice to be made between hypertext and the novel. As if you could write literary hypertext without the novel, or cinema, or comics, or collage, or oral epic, or any of a dozen elder genres; or—and this point really bothers me—as if *hypertext would make all those things go away*. Not so. Hypertext makes a difference, and I think it is a difference most Americans have been slow to understand. It does not obliterate differences or nullify the art of the line. I was very conscious of this fact all through the writing of *Victory Garden*.

**dd:** In the same essay Coover made the word *or* into his keyword: One can read the story this way or that way, and this actually means first of all, one can navigate it this way or that way. Is *or* the deeper meaning of hypertext, corresponding to the *or* in postmodern philosophy and nowadays point of view and life?

**SM:** Or... not. I affiliate with the school of "and" instead of "or," even though the masters of that college (folks like the poet Jim Rosenberg) often despair of my progress. Owing somewhat to the nature of its medium (node/link hypertext) and more to the way I used it (eschewing the structure-mapping facilities in Storyspace), *Victory Garden* can easily be taken as an exercise in displacement, as on one level it surely is. This allows readers like the American critic Laura Palmer to accuse me of simple randomness, a basic refusal of form. Often we get the readers we deserve, rather than the ones we invent. The reader of my dreams picks up the challenge of articulation and intuitively supplies the landscape that lies between any two interwoven points. As I've said on several occasions, node/link is an impoverished model: we need to think at least of node, link, *and space*, the third term being where intuition of the unseen or unexpressed comes into the picture, in at least a virtual sense. But as some readers will always say: *in your dreams, old man*.

**dd:** In *Victory Garden* you quote from Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths": "In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pen, he chooses - simultaneously - all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork." ... Miles MacArthur, a figure of *Victory Garden*, then discusses the point of Borges' story with his students: "Try for a minute to see beyond necessity, beyond determinism. Who says there's only one way? Who says it only happens once? If we use our imaginations we can learn to see the world differently, and with that vision we can create systems that aren't constrained to singularity. Multiple values, multiple horizons. That's what the shift to virtuality is all

about - creating new worlds that make room for difference. Why, someday we might even be able to bend time itself....."

Whereas Hypertext sometime is considered to mirror life because it calls the reader to make decisions, this passage makes clear that to the contrary Hypertext is all but life. Decisions in life are rather irreversible, one can not simply go back, return to try another way this time. With Hypertext you can check out *each* alternative, your decision is no real decision. Hypertext thus bends time. To some extent it's blasphemy, considered that time is property of God, and is not to be bent by human. This holds, one could add, as much as the imperative that the genetic code is not to be manipulated by human beings. Does Hypertext follows a general tendency of the time?

**SM:** Again, I want to answer with "and," not "or". If humans did not wish to bend time we would not have stories; and if the radical inconsistency of hypertext narrative offends God, I think it does so by intensifying an effect already present in any non-Providential narrative; as Walter Benjamin famously observed, what is a story but a way to run past the ending which (to a secular humanist anyway) seems all too absolute and unknowable for each of us?

**dd:** Lets move to the 'absolut' author. When it comes to hyper-literature, one always hears theorists point out the high level of reader control. The link to this view is the link of Hypertext, i.e. that to choose is in the hand of the reader. The link may fail as proof, because it is placed by the author, who at least determines the encountered alternatives. Nevertheless, the author gives up control about reading, since she can't predict which alternative finally will be chosen. This produces a conflict between two principles of order, namely the development of dramatic tension as construed by the author, on the one hand, and the freedom of choice enjoyed (or suffered?) by the reader, on the other hand. How do you experience this issue as author and (academic) reader of Hypertext ? Is randomness a valuable quality of digital aesthetics? Do we need new conventions for traditional properties like plot and character in Hypertext? And what role the author is likely to play in the future?

**SM:** These are very hard questions that seem to require a book-length response, for instance *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Janet Murray) or *The End of Books or Books Without End* (J.Y. Douglas)--books with very different opinions on the question of randomness. Murray is interested in "immersive" media like the aptly named holodeck of *Star Trek* fantasy, inventions which would be tightly bound to determinate structures, while Douglas develops a more complex scheme in which browsing and searching, random play and goal-driven pursuit, alternate to produce narrative pleasure.

Both agree that the role of the author in multidimensional fictions must change radically from what it has been in traditional narrative, and when they say that, I always feel myself somewhat in the cross-hairs. Despite their theoretical

differences, I think both Douglas and Murray would agree that the lone-wolf post-Romantic AUTHOR is destined to be replaced by the DESIGNER, a creator of conditions who must be more of an ensemble (if not a team) player even if s/he works alone, because of the role of the reader/player in the active reception of the work. So yes, we do need fresh ways to understand the constituents of fiction: character as function, plot as possibility, author as architect. Of course, these developments have been thoroughly foreseen in all the narrative genres for at least the last century. I have a favorite soundbite of Michael Joyce intoning, "This is not new," which I play in my head whenever these ideas come to mind.

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**dd:** In your hyperfiction [Hegirascope](#) links appear not within the text as bold or underlined hotwords but in the margin. In addition there is a default link which takes the reader after 30 seconds automatically to the next node. What is this fiction about and why did you set it up that way?

**SM:** The guitarist for R.E.M. once described the core of their hit song, *Stand*, as "a big, dumb riff." Ditto for *Hegirascope*, if I may mix the famous with the obscure. In the spring of 1995, I was browsing through the new design features introduced in Netscape Navigator 1.1 and it struck me that automatic page refresh, or "client pull"-the HTTP equivalent of a "big, dumb riff"--would be great fun to play with. A week or so later, a couple of Gulf War vets blew up the Federal building in Oklahoma City, and this got my attention in a different way, as had Mr. Gingrich's infamous Contract and the right-wing insurgency of 1994. Add the ongoing irruption of the World Wide Web as a cultural phenomenon, and you have the ingredients of *Hegirascope*.


I've had two wonderful responses to this text. One came from Michael Joyce, who the first time he saw it said, "it's the hypertext that reads itself." The other is in Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext*, where he notes with characteristic intelligence that *Hegirascope* parodies the World Wide Web. I've always been concerned with the way many people look at the Web (even now) and see Greater Television. While much of what I was doing in "Hegirascope" was indeed just playing, there was at least a shadow of serious purpose behind it. If you realize that there's at least one very scary story unfolding in the midst of all that channel-surfing, this claim may seem a bit more plausible.

**dd:** Node 047 starts with the words "This is the dream of remote control. In this dream you can press a button whenever you like and totally reconceive the world around you. Click, you are two hundred feet tall looking down on sleeping suburbia [...]" Having read approximately to this line, the node disappears, turns into a black screen with a single word in the middle - 'click'. This seems to be the practice of remote control and of course, this is a false link. Nothing happens. One has to go backwards in order to finish reading the dream. One must hurry in doing this, since the screen changes again and again. So not only does the reader not get the

promised feeling of remote controls, but rather he feels as though he himself is being controlled remotely.

The irony of the promise of remote control lies totally in the linkage. The link is a deconstruction of the text. However, there is even more. There is a deconstruction of the deconstruction. Browsing the black screen, the reader will encounter many hidden links, twice as many as are provided on regular nodes. The occurrence of these links modifies the meaning once more by saying: you will not find remote control if you just click on where it is promised, you have to be skeptical, you have to look around. I have always referred to this node as a good example of how the setting up of a link conveys a message which complements, or more exactly, modifies the meaning of the letters. Do you agree?

**SM:** In our teaching practice, my partner Nancy Kaplan and I like to refer to the text that signals a hypertext link as a "cue." We explain this in terms of a direct analogy with theatre: a stage cue means one thing to the audience and another to the fellow playing Polonius, waiting in the wings to make his entrance. This is a trivial reduction of your very elegant point about the deconstruction of deconstruction, but it bears out your observation. Hypertext isn't just a disordered or deficient deployment of type (even though in *Hegirascope* I very deliberately ruled out images). It brings a new way of understanding the operations of writing.

**dd:** In contrast to *Hegirascope* your more recent work  *Reagan Library* uses Virtual Reality images as illustration and as a navigation-map. Readers without the video program *QuickTime* will not be able to read this work. A pretty large step away from only word-based hypertext as known from *Storyspace* and the so-called "Eastgate School". In your recent piece *The Color of Television* together with Sean Cohen you also use connecting words with images. And your website now has some Flash-Demos showing animated words and some other "fleshy" effects. What do you think about the perils of multimedia? Will Flash help digital narration or destroy it because it's "too much fun", as one of your flash-demo reads?

**SM:** As Jay Bolter observed 10 years ago, digital technologies like bitmapped displays remind us that the line between word and image has always been arbitrary. On the bitmapped screen (indeed on any screen), the word is an image. I follow Jay in refusing to distinguish word and image in any absolute way. It may have been important, once upon a time, for Eastgate writers to concentrate on type to the exclusion of graphics—though I do want to point out that there are a number of graphics in *Victory Garden*, including a set of maps. We needed to claim some attention for what Mark Bernstein still calls "serious hypertext," in distinction to games and other entertainments. As I've confessed more recently, this move now seems somewhat petulant and narrow-minded. As games like *Myst*, *Riven*, or *The Sims* demonstrate, the category of serious play is far from empty—and indeed this was true even back in the 1980s, when interactive fictions like *Mindwheel* and *A*

*Mind Forever Voyaging*, and *Portal* were in circulation. (Alas, they fell out of circulation pretty quickly, and it was partly our desire to avoid that fate that motivated our timidity toward images.)

My thinking about word and image has advanced a great deal since 1994, when I came to my present academic home at the University of Baltimore, where I work in a program that requires students to become proficient both as writers and as visual designers. Team-teaching with a typographer and a master graphic designer has helped me shed my earlier, print-dominated misconceptions about text. (And to be sure, the massive dose of poststructuralism I received in graduate school also plays a part.) Turning from diskette to Web distribution and gearing up to teach fledgling Web designers has confirmed my belief that writing is now inextricably linked to design—though that term means considerably more for the Web than it does for print.

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**dd:** Let's talk about the "literary field" of Internet. The author's freedom to publish on the web, bypassing the constraints of the traditional book market, sometimes turns out to be the burden on readers. There are tons of mediocre writing. You once suggested establishing "reviewing agencies" to evaluate self-published work. (*Pushing Back: Living and Writing in Broken Space*, S. 659) This charges literary theory with the duty of providing criteria by which to judge. And as we know now this theory cannot only be focused on words even if they appear nonlinear. Images, sound, video, animation, and all the software beneath it are to be taken into account. Do you see any good attempts to go this way? Could you recommend some critics or reviews the expected "reviewing agencies" should learn from?

**SM:** We're still a long way from even a first cut at a practical criticism of "interactive" or (as I prefer) *ergodic* fiction, but since I've just used Espen Aarseth's term let me nominate him for any virtual academy to which the task of creating such a criticism might fall. Aarseth's book (*Cybertext*) provides a very useful taxonomic and descriptive base for understanding narrative in a multi-media context. I think it's considerably more catholic in its approach than Murray's *Holodeck* (which is nonetheless an important book). Aarseth makes connections to games, films, and earlier experimental literary traditions which I've found very useful. I'd also like to mention the work of the American comics creator Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics* and *Reinventing Comics*) which help considerably in approaching problems of mediation and sequence.

All that said, though, we do not yet have a community of critical response for ergodic work to match what exists for film, theater, or print literature; and there must be a community before we can have any sense of common standards. This is why I think literary awards for hypertext and multimedia fiction make good sense right now. Having taken part in the judging for one of these competitions—and more important,

having finished out of contention for another—it's clear to me that only by trying to articulate publically our notions of excellence in new media can we move toward the sort of useful, sustained dialogue that constitutes good criticism. The German *Pegasus* award and the British *TrAce/Alt-X* prize got this process moving nicely. In the U.S., the new Electronic Literature Organization is trying to keep up the momentum, offering its own prizes for electronic poetry and fiction. Aside from prizes, people like Kia Mennie, founder of the ht-lit discussion list, and Deena Larsen, who moderates a regular series of online chats sponsored by ELO and TrAce, are making enormously important contributions to the evolution of an electronic literary community.

**dd:** Hypertext is often seen as fulfillment of deconstruction. You yourself point out, that hypertext "is already present as a totality, but which invites the reader not to ratify its wholeness, but to deconstruct it." Three years later one of your articles is entitled *Rhizome and Resistance*. However, you are skeptical about the dream of a new culture, as you point out three more years later, concerning the development of the Web: "If certain people have their way, tomorrow's links will be as numerous and important as today's 'postcards and telegrams' – that is, they will dwindle into obscurity." You predict "television, albeit in new boxes". What do you think three years later?

**SM:** Actually, as I remember it, I've been pretty skeptical all the way along. Ten years ago this winter, I started working on an essay called "You Say You Want a Revolution," which takes up McLuhan's semi-mystical "laws of media," the last of which asks what a technology becomes at the point of "reversal," when it is carried up to and beyond its logical limits. For some reason, I wanted to know in 1990 what hypertext would look like at reversal. Have we reached that point now? Maybe. Certainly the merger of America Online with Time Warner could portend a gigantic attempt to transform the Internet into a conventional, entirely passive mass medium—television in one inescapable box. That is one kind of "reversal," though probably not the one McLuhan had in mind. Yet the same year that brought us the AOL/TW merger and the wholesale meltdown of the so-called new economy also produced the *Napster* phenomenon and its truly revolutionary variant, *Gnutella*.

It's easy to feel "otherminded," as Joyce says, about these developments. On the one hand, *Napster* has shacked up with Bertelsmann AG; and yet *Gnutella* lives, and it will be very, very interesting to see how the intellectual property barons attempt to deal with a genuinely headless, peer-to-peer circulation system. If the one big box of television ends up wired to a headless network, my earlier concerns diminish... or rather, they shift in other directions. I'm tempted to describe our moment as a phase transition from mass culture to culture at critical mass: a state in which the exchange of energy and information has accelerated to such a degree that major and explosive transformations may ensue.



Such an outlook may not appear hopeful. Just as ergodic fiction challenges literary people to articulate and defend their common notions of value, so the reversal of the mass media might force us to reconstruct civil society—hardly an easy task to contemplate, but one that seems incumbent upon my country this week, as we try to figure out how we managed not to elect a president, and what our electoral dysfunction says about the state of our society. Whatever happens, I think the period of experimentation and rapid change in media that began at the end of the 1970s is likely to continue. So at the very least, we won't be bored.

**dd:** Much enough. However, I wish you a president soon and thank you for this interview.