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Response to: The Supremely Fictional Importance of Hypertext
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Against Hypertext¹

Stephanie Strickland is both perpetrator and victim of the hypertext hype.

It's more than just the ironic, appropriated title of her essay. Throughout *The Supremely Fictional Importance of Hypertext*, Strickland oscillates indecisively between several positions. She posits digital hypertext as a radical break from preceding media. She quotes from evolutionary models which incorporate the newer hypertextual forms into broader histories of media development. Occasionally she revels in the infinitely recombinant play of meaning. And yet at still other moments in her essay she longs for a return to more ancient media forms that were known to us when we lived "in the trees."

Strickland's essay embodies the unsolved problem of addressing these new modes of writing, narrative, and experience that she groups under the rubric of "hypertext." Her essay raises many more questions than I can address here. But my response will begin with just one.

A Question

What exactly is it that separates "old" media from "new media?" To restate: What separates non-hyper-text from hypertext? What separates the book you are holding in your hands from a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure, where each page ends with a branching choice?

Strickland starts out with an extensive discussion of the challenges of archiving digital media, which might point the answer to my question back at the computer medium itself. Yet as many of her non-digital examples of hypertext illustrate (Oulipo, Tao Te Ching, poetry), the phenomenon under discussion here can be found both on and off the computer. So the distinguishing characteristic of the various forms Strickland includes under the banner of hypertext has nothing to do with digital technology.

Instead, I would assert that the key feature is the participatory nature of the reader/writer/player/audience's experience – embodied in that slippery term "interactivity." In other words, rather than looking at the technological objects of hypertext in and of themselves, I would like to look at the multivalent experiences they produce and the way in which those experiences emerge through processes of interactivity.

Interactivity

“Interactivity.” A word nearly as overused and despicable as “hypertext.” It goes without saying that everything is perhaps always already interactive. But that isn’t a very useful conclusion, assuming that we do in fact want to make some meaningful distinctions. How is it possible to interact with a text? I propose four broadly defined modes of participation:

(1) Interpretive interactivity: cognitive participation with a text

The psychological, emotional, hermeneutic, semiotic, reader-response, Rashomon-effect-ish, etc. kind of interactions that a participant can have with the so-called “content” of a text. Example: you re-read a book after several years have passed and you find it’s completely different than the book you remember.

(2) Utilitarian interactivity: functional participation with a text

Included here: functional, structural interactions with the textual apparatus. That book you re-read: did it have a table of contents? An index? What was the graphic design of the pages? How thick was the paper stock? How large was the book? How heavy? All of these interactions are part of the total experience of reading.

(3) Designed Choices: explicit participation with a text

This is “interaction” in the obvious sense of the word: overt participation like clicking the non-linear links of a hypertext novel, following the rules of a Surrealist language game, rearranging the clothing on a set of paper dolls. Included here: choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other procedures programmed into the interactive experience.

(4) Macro-interactivity: cultural participation with a text

This is interaction outside the experience of a single text. The clearest examples come from fan culture, in which readers appropriate, deconstruct, and reconstruct linear media, participating in and propagating massive narrative worlds.

Preemptive disclaimer: these four modes of interactivity (cognitive, functional, explicit, and cultural) are not four distinct categories, but four overlapping flavors of participation that occur in varying degrees in all media experience. Most interactive activities incorporate some or all of them simultaneously.

Back to the question at hand. The textual objects that Strickland is writing about, the things she calls hypertext, are distinguished from other media by their inclusion in category (3), designed choices. While they exhibit other forms of interactivity as well, the incorporation of overt and explicit participation seems to be the defining characteristic of these forms that (as Strickland puts it) “invite rupture, catastrophe, branching, bifurcation, and entrainment.”

There are plenty of examples of explicitly interactive media – architecture, computer games, letters-to-the-editor, sports, jazz – that offer richer and more meaningful interaction than tired old hypertext novels. I would go so far to state that hypertext (by which I mean the text-on-screen-with-links-that-lead-to-other-texts-with-links variety), is one of the poorest examples of designed interactivity around. Why be so hard on hypertext, especially considering that it is the classifying trope for Strickland's essay? To defend my position, I need to add a refinement to the understanding of interactive texts I am building here.

If designed choices are the distinguishing features of hypertext, it would pay to give them a closer look. Regardless of the way in which explicit interactivity manifests, (text hyperlinks, branching hierarchical narrative tree, dice-rolled random musical notes, shuffled images on a deck of storycards, etc), it manifests as a *system*. Explicit interactivity always incorporates a dynamic structure, a mechanistic system of some kind made of moving parts that have shifting relationships with each other. How to understand this curious aesthetics of dynamic structure? I propose two general models that these structures tend to take:²

(1) Content-Based or Embedded structure

A content-based structure consists of pregenerated “content” that is navigated by the participant as she interacts with the system. The branching Choose-Your-Own-Adventure structure is a clear example of this type. The content is already embedded in the system before any interaction begins.

(2) System-based or Emergent structure

System-based structures are sets of rules and procedures that result in unexpected experiences and content. The Surrealist *Exquisite Corpse* is a good example: not a single line of the final image exists beforehand. Instead, it emerges as the participants follow the rules of the game.

Explicitly interactive media experiences have some measure of both of these kinds of structures at play. The multimedia computer game *Myst* is largely predetermined, but the puzzles are somewhat dynamic and can be solved in any order. (Translation: *Myst* is more embedded and less emergent.) In contrast, while some elements of the computer simulation *Sim City* have been created in advance, the game is a highly granular and modular system from which unexpected results emerge every time. (*Sim City* is more emergent and less embedded.) Other examples fall in the middle, such as a Magnetic Poetry Kit: while the words themselves are all pregenerated, the open-ended structure of interaction is quite emergent. (Balanced emergent and embedded elements.)

Digital Participation

Content-based interactive texts are more indebted to their linear cousins like film or novels. They consist of segments of pregenerated linear content, received in some order

by the participant. System-based texts are a different matter altogether. Rather than combinatorial, they are computational. While there are examples of emergent texts in non-electronic media, what I am calling system-based interactive texts are much more at home in digital media than content-based ones. It is open-ended, emergent texts that constitute the great unexplored terrain of computer interactivity.

Digital system-based texts use the computer as a computational device, creating systems of emergent, bottom-up complexity. Digital content-based texts use the computer like some kind of fancy VCR, playing back pregenerated sound, text, and image.

Whence hypertext? The hypertext novel as we know it today, the click-to-see-more-screen-text kind of hypertext, is unquestionably a content-based structure. A writer creates all of the copy, plugs in the links, and then the reader tunnels through all of the nooks and crannies. There is a kind of authorial vanity in the hypertext scheme. The implicit presumption: that the reader will actually take the time to explore every link and ponder its meticulously choreographed significance.

The act of reading hypertext: click...click...click. Robbed of contingent, dynamic consequence, the token interactivity of the hypertext novel is a thin veil over the deathly rigid structure. Hypertext "choice" is not meaningful, as it is in a game of Go or Zork. Instead, each click reinforces the rigid authority of the author, any sense of play reduced to acquiescence. The hypertext form is nonlinear, yes, but stillborn.

In Closing

The question remains: if hypertext is such a problem, why would Strickland use it as her rubric for understanding participatory media? Strickland glimpses the promises of interactive media experience but doesn't understand how to get there. It is not enough to recognize the theoretical possibilities and give them a name. The challenges are more properly questions of interactive design.

Despite the fact that Strickland gives a nod to games, ephemeral performances, and other non-written media, her valorization of poetry as the originary hypertext is most revealing. She clings to words-on-the-page, to "hypertext" in its equally dubious roles as both the crowing achievement of media evolution and as the most ancient of media experience ("in the trees").

Case in point: the most overtly performative feature of the essay, its three-voice format. In employing hypertext in this way - as a stylistic metaphor - Strickland offers a flimsy scrim of participation, only to miss the thing itself. Hypertext as she would like it to be, "the ecstasy of play," is not merely a matter of literary style.

In case I have been misunderstood, I want to state for the record: there's nothing wrong with writing or with writing poetry. But if your ambition is to fulfil the unfulfilled promise of "new media," to hack the contours of new digital forms, to deconstruct and

reconstruct culture and its codes, you are best served to look beyond writing, beyond poetry, beyond hypertext.

So look to what? There are plenty of examples. An ecosystem. Traffic. A dance club floor. A river. A network. The movement of dust. A cocktail party. A tennis game. The stock market. A brain. A riot. This book set on fire, its curling, blazing pages blackening to ash, blowing suddenly away in the wind.

Notes

1. Many of the ideas contained this essay were generated during the *Narrative and Interactivity* course I team-teach with Frank Lantz at New York University.
2. The terms *embedded* and *emergent* are borrowed from Marc LeBlanc's lexicon of game design terminology.