Hyperion

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ABSTRCT
A critique of interactive fiction, argues that instead of providing a window onto the human condition hyperfiction merely provides a mirror of readers desires.

On HYPERFICTION (1993)[2]

Shortly before he stepped in front of a milk truck, the 'philosophe' (that's French for comedian) Roland Barthe wrote S/Z. The book contained such witty one liners as 'the goal of a literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text." Words like those inspired a new generation of hyperactive authors to use their computers to create "hypertexts'. Such works invite the reader to use the cursor on their computers to choose which strand of a chain mail text they wish to follow.

Hyperfiction allows us to read non sequentially, instead of passively following a sequence imposed by an author the way we must in traditional books. In the beginning hypertexts were used by academics as electronic footnotes, offering supplementary information to the main text that the reader could choose to access or not. But by the mid-eighties the drug of interactivity was just too tempting for fiction writers to resist.

Michael Joyce's: *Afternoon a Story* is to the hypertext or interactve novel what the Gutenberg bible is to print publishing. Like a deck of cards that can be shuffled and reshuffled, each time providing subtle variations on just how and when we learn the secret that haunts the narrator. The library at Brown University already stocks more than 300 hypernovels and novelist Robert Coover teaches a creative writing course on interactive fiction. Someone had better put a stop to this before it gets out of hand.

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Graham Greene begins Monsieur Quixote with the sentence: "It happened this way." The reader understands she will now enter the story in the company of a narrator who will reveal what happened. The reader may doubt the narrator's veracity (Ford Maddox Ford's The Good Soldier); she may be told the same story from multiple points of view (Durrell's Alexandria Quartet) or in a bizarre sequence (Cortazar's Hopscotch) but eventually she will arrive at some sort of satisfactory conclusion. In the interactive novel the reader is left to stumble through the labyrinth, alone. This is the literary equivalent of B.Y.O. B.

At this point I should confess that I may have inadvertently contributed to the birth of this hip Frankenstein by writing a play entitled Tamara (1981) long before personal computers made writing the interactive novel a reality.

In Tamara the audience chooses and physically follows any one of 10 characters throughout the rooms of a real mansion in which there are between one and nine scenes happening simultaneously. Since they can physically only follow one scene at a time the choice they make determines the play they see. In effect, they write their own play. While each of the ten characters in the play has a story to tell, the two main plots deal with sex and politics. (I leave aside the question of whether or not these are the same thing.) At the end of the play the Italian poet rushes to rape the painter Tamara de Lempicka. Meanwhile the fascist Aldo Finzi has finally discovered that the new chauffeur is in the communist resistance. Both of these

story lines overlap in such a way that the audience has only one final choice: Should they follow the sex or pursue the politics? Most people choose the sex and ironically miss (the shooting of the chauffeur) the climax.

The small cadre of techno-wankers who wax poetic about the interactive novel suggest that allowing the reader to make choices as to the evolution or outcome of a given story democratizes the creative process. For them, interactivity becomes a vehicle for the enfranchisement of the creatively challenged. Finally every Schwarztzenagger can co- write with Shakespeare. But underneath this seductive promise of a new literary Eden, there's some serious hierarchial-patriarcal butt-kicking going on.

Nowadays,the world of the imagination has become the main battleground for issues that should properly be decided in the political arena. For many people,their cries for inclusion go unheard or a met with indifference. Fatigued by the real battle, they've retreated into the marshes of art. Here, confused by the distinction between the world and the word, they attack the hierarchy of art, as if it mirrored some political hierarchy. Ever the flagellants, the arts community has embraced this notion, as they embrace anything that promises a momentary sense of relevance or belonging. Liberated from the chains of talent they begin chanting: We shall have no Gods above us. Now we shall all be Gods! Dizzy with virtue they seem soon arrive at the crack house of interactivity.

In these dark rooms the writer stumbles over the physicist who hand him the pipe and tell him interactivity is the new quantum mechanical paradigm. "Forget all that stuff about stories needing an arc or trajectory with a beginning, middle, and end, that crap went out with Newton. Suck on this, kid, let me tell you about parallel universes, about Heisenberg and Hawkings." And when a multiculturist brother wakes up from a

nightmare screaming: Linear narrative is fascist." The writer is made to understand it is her duty to surrender to interactivity, to help force pluralism into art, and through this back-door, into society.

From now on the answer to every multiple choice question shall be: All of the above.

The interactivists recount the tragic history of the traditional reader's oppression. This reader is a slave, a victim of a tyrannical author who forces him to follow the plot. "But I don't want Richard to assume the throne!" The tortured reader screams: but does the malevolent author hear his cry? Never. The plot moves on, sometimes ploddingly, sometimes relentlessly, but always, regardless of the reader's entreaties. Richard will be king and there's nothing the reader can do about it, save close the book.

To exponents of interactivity, this choice is akin to telling the political opponent of a regime that her only choice is to flee the country. They demand to know how we as artists can continue to support a system that refuses to give voice to the reader, nay, a system that actively works to keep her disenfranchised. They argue that if the novel was interactive and reader didn't like any aspect of it, she could simply rewrite it. A click of the cursor would render the totalitarian state a democracy. In the interactive world of tomorrow, the reader will be able to decide what happens , to whom it happens, and how often it happens. If the phrase wasn't an oxymoron, I'd call this a deconstructionist plot.

In interactive fiction readers find the power and control which eludes them in real life. These poor saps are so busy scanning texts and making choices they begin to think they are participating in something real. But choice alone is not freedom. They move their cursors with the same junkie determination with which they click the remote control of their television. They are passive participants in a fictional world designed to keep them preoccupied while the powers that be

continue the business of raping and pillaging.

When the reader actually pushes buttons the writer loses her ability to push the metaphorical buttons that have traditionally given literature its power. When the reader is constantly making choices, the choices themselves override the plot. It is as if the map is more important than the landscape. (In spite of Bateson's injunctions to the contrary.)

The reader cannot enjoy being transported into another world because whenever he is called upon to make a choice he must leave the text and return to his reality. Once outside the text she makes choices based on her own life experience.

Whereas linear narrative anchors us to belief in a common humanity, interactive choice reinforces prejudice; the very thing literature seeks to overcome. When the writer gets the words just right, we pause and say aloud: exactly. We know. We understand. Choice destroys the writers ability to create empathy for characters whose world views do not correspond with our own. If the reader can, with the push of a button, take the character in a direction 180 degrees from the writer's imagining, the reader will only ever himself reflected in the text that appears on the screen.

Defenders of hyperfiction might argue that the writer ultimately writes the whole text. They say the readers task is only to maker her way through the labyrinth of multiple readings the author provides. But is right to ask Picasso to provide Purple, Yellow, and Orange renderings of his Blue period? If I write a short story in which the couple live happily ever after, must I now also provide the alternative ending where she turns out to be a psycho with an ice pick under the bed, or he turns out to be an orthodox rabbi suffering a crisis of faith? Interactivity turns fiction into the home shopping network. (You don't like the bracelet then how about this zircon ring?) Quality surrenders to quantity, and Flaubert turns to Danielle Steel. "Wait! Don't go! That's not what happened to Emma Bovary! She never took the arsenic. Honestly. Press 2 to find out. Stay with me."

Perhaps this then is my greatest fear? Interactivity exposes authors as the hucksters we are. Pathetic, self absorbed neurotics whose desperate craving for love find us clinging to every passing reader begging them to stay, begging them to click on just one more link....

Authors update: The New York Times has yet to produce an interactive fiction best seller list.