

# Hypertexts: Changing Narrative Forms in the Era of Digitality

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## **Abstract:**

**Hypertext fiction is a new branch of Digital literature and/or Ergodic literature. The term ‘hypertext’, coined by Theodore H. Nelson in *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, can be most simply defined as ‘non-sequential writing’. Hypertext fiction is a term that is used to describe novels or short stories that are written in hypertext and sometimes contain accompanying image, film and sound. Such works of digital literature can be accessed on the World Wide Web but they are also distributed via self-contained storage devices such as CD-ROMs. Hypertext in this sense means a system that branches and allows choices to the reader, so that the user can move within a hypertext system according to their rationale. Facilitated by a digital environment, hypertext allows documents to be linked according to concepts and ideas rather than alphabetical or numerical sequences. In hypertext, documents are structured according to context and purpose and horizontal or vertical hierarchies are forsaken in favour of *intertwingularity*, an apparently neologised blend of ‘intermingled’ and ‘intertwined’ which suggests complex configurations and multiple combinations. The proposed paper focuses on the ways in which hypertext fictions emerging as a challenge to reading and writing in the liberal humanist paradigms. It attempts to concentrate on the redefined world of these texts and the fictional world constructed solely through the choices that the readers make. The interactive nature of these fictions is a liberating experience for the readers and writers trapped in the ‘linguistic turn’ of the Poststructuralist theories. And, in the context of the theories of language teaching, the pedagogical value of the approach is a challenge to the learner in plural ways, as there is the logical possibility of the ‘presence’ of multiple texts.**

**Keywords: hypertext, lexia, hypercard, multimedia, polyphony, intertwingularity.**

## **Text:**

Over the past two decades, the internet has radically altered the ways people read, write, and listen, reshaping these practices in deep and lasting ways. Originally developed for military and industrial purposes, computers were intended for tasks like calculation and data processing, not personal use. However, with the rise of commercial computing in the late 1980s and the emergence of the World Wide Web, a new era—the Information Revolution—began. As digital media expanded, the printed book, which had served as a dominant medium of knowledge since the Renaissance, began to experience both structural and linguistic transformations. While some critics and technologists prematurely predicted the decline of print and authorship, a new literary form—hypertext—began to gain ground, particularly in the United States.

Hypertext fiction is a genre within digital or ergodic literature, where the reader must engage actively with the text to construct meaning. The term “hypertext” was first introduced by Theodore H. Nelson in *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, originally defined as “non-sequential writing” (44) —a concept now more commonly called “non-linear” writing. In Riccardo Riddi, it is defined as “interactive fiction” (Riddi). Hypertext fiction consists of stories written in this form and may include multimedia elements such as images, audio, or video. These works are accessible through online platforms or on standalone media like CD-ROMs. Unlike traditional print, hypertext organizes information by idea and context rather than sequence or hierarchy,

favouring what Nelson termed intertwingularity — “Everything is deeply intertwined” (45) — a metaphor for the deep, intricate interconnections of digital texts. George P. Landow observes that “Hypertext denotes an information medium that links verbal and nonverbal information” (4).

In hypertext environments, discrete units of text or media are called *lexia*, a term borrowed from Roland Barthes by George P. Landow and widely used in academic discussions of hypertext. Depending on the software platform, other terms include “card” (HyperCard), “frame,” “page,” or “homepage.” Links connect one lexia to another, while *anchors* are the exact points within a lexia where a link begins or ends. *Cues*, introduced by Stuart Moulthrop and Nancy Kaplan, are the visual markers (like underlined blue text or images) indicating an anchor’s presence (Bell 10). Some hypertexts deliberately omit cues for aesthetic or narrative purposes.

Lexias can include not just text, but also audio, video, and images. From a technical standpoint, linking different types of content is functionally the same, which is why terms like *hypermedia* or *multimedia* are often used interchangeably with *hypertext*. However, *hypertext* typically refers to the overall structure of interconnected elements, while *hypermedia* or *multimedia* emphasize the inclusion of multiple forms of media within the text (Bell 11).

The origins of hypertext fiction are debated, in part because the term “hypertext” means different things in different contexts. Many earlier experimental works are better understood as *protohypertexts*—precursors to digital hypertext that anticipate its nonlinear and interactive qualities. Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (1963) consists of 100 unbound pages intended to be read in any order, challenging linear narrative. Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (1966) offers multiple reading sequences, allowing readers to follow the traditional order or an alternative one. Robert Coover’s *The Babysitter* (1969) presents fragmented, overlapping scenes that invite readers to construct the narrative themselves. Another Coover story, “Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl”, experiments with ambiguity and fragmented perspectives, offering multiple interpretations. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale highlights this story’s complexity and open-endedness as qualities that strongly anticipate modern hypertext fiction, where reader engagement and interpretive freedom are central: Carl, a businessman on a fishing holiday, either sleeps with one of his fishing guide’s women or he does not; if he sleeps with one of them, it is either Swede’s wife Quenby or his daughter Ola; whichever one he sleeps with (if he actually does sleep with one of them), Swede either finds out about it or he does not; if he does find out, he either plans to kill Carl in revenge or he does not. *All* of these possibilities are realized in Coover’s text. (107-8)

The idea of multiple narrative paths and alternate realities finds early expression in Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Garden of Forking Paths”. Often considered a forerunner to hypertext fiction, Borges’ story imagines time and narrative as infinitely branching, where every choice creates a new, parallel universe. He envisions both a book and a world in which all possible outcomes of every event unfold simultaneously along diverging timelines. Long before the advent of digital technology, Borges gave literary form to the concept of non-linear storytelling that would later become central to hypertext fiction.

Digital hypertext—the focus of this analysis—has a relatively recent history, developing over the last few decades. Although early explorations began in the 1980s, the genre gained significant recognition with Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon, a story*. First released on floppy disk in 1987 and republished in 1990 through Eastgate Systems’ *Storyspace* platform, *Afternoon* marked a foundational moment in the evolution of electronic literature. *Storyspace*, along with Jay David Bolter’s *Writing Space*, provided structured systems for authors and readers to create and interact with non-linear narratives. These tools enabled a new form of literary expression—one where the reader’s path through the text directly shaped the unfolding story, making interactivity and multiplicity central to the reading experience. These approaches provide, in a sense, a bridge between two ages, a sort of Rosetta Stone of theory for the move from print to computer media. In *Writing Space*, Bolter develops a rich history of text literacy that provides a foundation for theories and concerns about the move from print text to hypertext. Similarly, *storyspace* exists on both sides of the boundary between page

and screen. The program can function either as a outlining program in which writers can produce print-like texts (either for paper or on-line) or as a hypertext program (the program's main focus). (Bolter 3)

Unlike earlier hypertext platforms such as HyperCard, Guide, and Toolbook, *Storyspace* was specifically designed to move beyond the limitations of print-based models. Programs like HyperCard and Toolbook are structured around virtual stacks of index cards, while Guide mimics cross-referenced printed formats like encyclopedias. Although some creative works have been produced using these tools—such as John McDavid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* (1993) and Deena Larsen's *Marble Springs* (1996)—their interfaces were not inherently designed to support literary experimentation. In contrast, *Storyspace* encourages innovation by allowing authors to visually construct texts as webs of interlinked lexias.

Jay David Bolter, in *Writing Space*, emphasizes that *Storyspace* offers a fresh visual and conceptual structure for both composing and reading texts, opening up new metaphorical and narrative possibilities. One of the earliest and most influential works created using this platform is Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a story*. Composed of 539 lexias connected by 951 links, it enables readers to explore multiple, interwoven storylines that reflect the fragmented psyche of the protagonist.

The central narrative of *Afternoon* eventually comes into focus: a man named Peter grappling with the suspicion that his estranged wife and son may have died in a car accident. As readers move through the text, they uncover Peter's emotional instability, denial, and introspection. Although the narrative is nonlinear and open to many interpretations, a coherent underlying story gradually surfaces through attentive reading. In sum, *Afternoon* is a highly experimental work that uses hypertext to construct poetic and ambiguous pathways. The narrative resists closure, often looping back on itself, and leaves readers to confront uncertainty—mirroring the fragmented, unresolved nature of Peter's internal experience.

Following the success of *Afternoon: A Story*, hypertext fiction began to flourish. Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1991) exemplifies this growth, using hypertext's branching format to present a historically layered narrative shaped by the reader's path through various author-designed possibilities.

Set during the early 1990s, as the First Gulf War begins, *Victory Garden* shifts between two key locations: the Persian Gulf and the University of Tara in the U.S. While direct portrayals of the war are limited, its presence is felt strongly as a cultural and symbolic backdrop. The narrative offers differing viewpoints, such as Emily Runbird's firsthand experience in the Gulf, and the perspectives of those back home who perceive the war through media or secondhand accounts. Emily, once a student at Tara, is deployed to handle military mail in exchange for college funding. Meanwhile, her friends and acquaintances face personal and academic challenges. These include Jude Busch, her assertive friend; Victor Gardner, her former partner now romantically involved with Jude; Boris Urquhart, a professor with a troubled past involving Emily; and Thea Agnew, Emily's ex-advisor and mother of Leroy. The hypertext blends themes of war, identity, love, and intellectual life across interwoven storylines. Subplots explore family tensions between Thea and Leroy, dream research by Boris and Stephen Tate, and the evolving dynamics among Victor, Jude, and Emily.

Alongside *Afternoon* and *Victory Garden*, works like Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and Richard Holeton's *Figurski at Findhorn on Acid* (2001) are considered foundational texts of early hypertext fiction. Though they differ in narrative approach, all rely primarily on alphanumeric text with minimal use of audio or visual media. This text-centric design highlights the literary focus of early digital fiction, distinguishing it from later multimedia storytelling forms.

The theoretical basis of hypertext fiction lies at the intersection of digital technology and poststructuralist narratology. Influenced by theorists such as Saussure, Propp, Jakobson, Derrida, Barthes, and Genette, poststructuralism questions traditional, linear storytelling by emphasizing language's instability, narrative multiplicity, and philosophical skepticism. Roland Barthes played a pivotal role in this shift by introducing the idea of writerly (scriptible) texts, where readers are not passive receivers but active participants who generate meaning. In hypertext fiction, this concept is literalized, as readers navigate different narrative paths,

shaping their own versions of the story. This fluidity exposes the text's constructed nature and underscores the fictional world's shared creation between text and reader.

Expanding on this narrative model, scholars like Umberto Eco, Thomas Pavel, and particularly Marie-Laure Ryan apply 'Possible Worlds Theory' to interpret hypertext fiction. This theory originates from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's *Essays on Theodicy* (1710), where he argues that God envisioned infinite possible worlds before selecting the best one to exist. Each of these worlds is defined by varying conditions and reflects a rational process of choice.

In hypertext fiction, the actual world of the narrative represents the primary textual reality, surrounded by a web of alternate possible worlds. These alternatives emerge from characters' thoughts, desires, fears, and hypotheticals—each presenting a different version of the story. The reader's journey through these narrative paths mimics Leibniz's philosophical model, turning each act of reading into a selection among possible worlds. Thus, hypertext fiction not only challenges linearity but also deepens our understanding of narrative by foregrounding the coexistence and interplay of multiple realities within a single textual universe.

A modal system based on Ryan's approach would be helpful in the detailed analysis of any representative hypertext fiction.

The Actual World is the ontological domain that forms the centre of our system of reality. In the context of a literary analysis, it is the domain to which the reader belongs.

Possible worlds are ontological domains that represent alternatives to the Actual World. These are created by imaginings, wishes, fears and dreams of inhabitants of the Actual World.

A Textual Actual World is a particular type of possible world which is described and thereby created by an individual fictional text. It is the domain to which the characters of that text belong. It forms the centre of a Textual Universe to which respective alternative Textual Possible Worlds are affiliated.

Textual Possible Worlds belong to the same Textual Universe as the respective Textual Actual World and represent alternatives to what is given as fact in the narrative. Textual Possible Worlds are generated by characters' mental processes such as wishes, dreams or imaginings and therefore constitute possible alternatives to the actual course of events.

A Textual Universe is a modal system comprised of a Textual Actual World and associated Textual Possible Worlds. A Textual Universe is described and thereby constructed by a text. (Bell 25)

Ciccoricco uses Possible Worlds Theory to analyse how *Victory Garden* emphasizes the independent existence—its ontological distinctiveness—of its fictional universe, referred to as the Textual Actual World, while still preserving a sense of familiarity and plausibility, or epistemological alignment, with the real world. Through this lens, he investigates how the novel's narrative techniques make its fictional setting feel both self-contained and recognizable within the context of reality, showing how hypertext fiction navigates the boundary between fiction and truth.

The novel achieves this by modeling its fictional world on the Actual World as an epistemological reference point. This is evident in two examples—one entirely textual and the other partially so. In one instance, Thea and her son, Leroy, engage in a dialogue about the political causes of the Gulf War, reflecting real-world debates and grounding the narrative in familiar discourse.

Thea answered ... "Like who backed Saddam for eight years in the War with Iran? Who looked the other way when he 'accidentally' blew up one of our navy ships in the Gulf? Whose ambassador told him we weren't interested in his disputes with Kuwait?" ...

Leroy frowned. "You're saying it's our fault Saddam invaded Kuwait? You're saying he has a right to grab all those oilfields?" {Cyclops}. (*Victory Garden*, lexia 74)

The copyright notice in *Victory Garden* reads, "this is a work of fiction: no resemblance to actual persons is intended or should be inferred," placing the narrative within a reality shared by the author, reader, and the real

world. The novel's fictional world is defined by invented characters like Emily, Jude, Victor, and even the fictional University of Tara.

As readers interact with hypertext, they mentally construct possible worlds. Unlike interactive formats such as video games, *Victory Garden* does not permit readers to change the story externally, limiting their role to internal interpretation.

The hypertext creates multiple Textual Possible Worlds—alternative narrative outcomes shaped by the reader's navigational choices. For example, Emily might die in one narrative route or survive in another. This structure disrupts a single, linear storyline and challenges fixed chronological order.

The text is politically layered and contains multiple voices, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. It presents conflicting viewpoints, particularly about the Gulf War. One major thread, “{Thea's War}”, critiques U.S. government actions from a leftist stance, while other parts argue that Iraq initiated the conflict. Emily's letters introduce a personal dimension, expressing fear and differing beliefs, emphasizing that no single perspective can fully capture the situation.

Together, these narratives create a textual Universe. Unlike traditional literature, hypertexts offer multiple ideological angles and interpretive routes. Readers actively shape meaning by choosing and arranging lexias, challenging the idea of a fixed, authoritative text. Hypertexts also serve educational purposes, suggesting innovative approaches to teaching English and encouraging the development of regional hypertexts in areas such as Europe, Asia, and Africa.

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